Film Quarterly

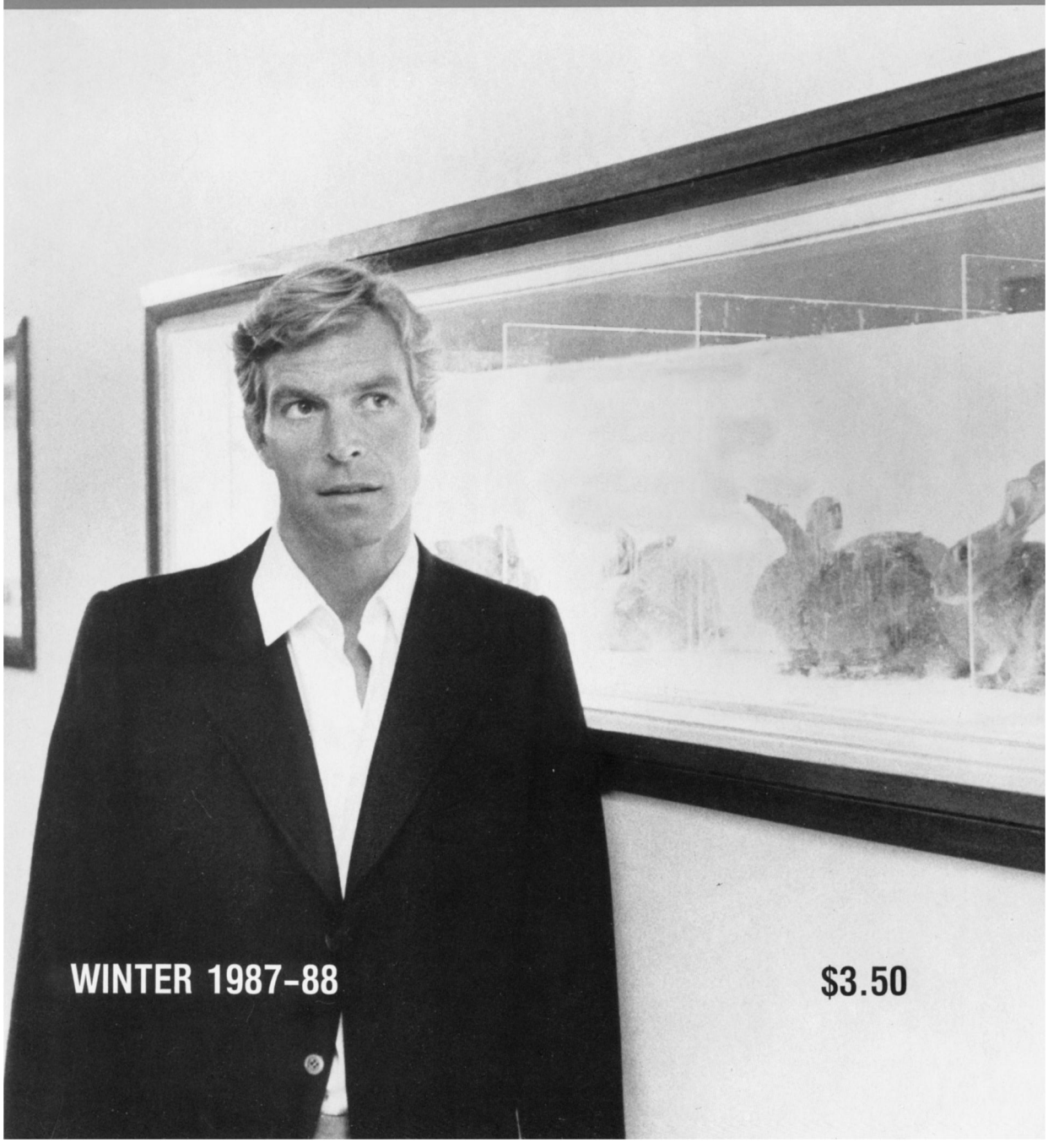
DARIO ARGENTO

JON JOST

SU FRIEDRICH

THE STEPFATHER *GONZA*

NYAMANTON *YELLOW EARTH*



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Cover: James Franciscus in Dario Argento's *The Cat o'Nine Tails* (National General Pictures)

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MAITLAND McDONAGH

Broken Mirrors/Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento

The colors are aggressively unnatural, perhaps like stained glass—saturated yellow and deep cobalt blue—perhaps artificially limpid, glittering pale turquoise and green. And always red, rich and clear. The camera is nervous. Restless. It swoops and glides, slinking along corridors, crouching at the bottom of staircases, perching on rooftops. It cranes up for dizzying high-angle panoramas, hunkers down to admire the tippy-tops of buildings against the blue, blue sky. Unrestrained by strictly narrative concerns, the camera reflects no point-of-view save its own as it creeps across the facade of a sharply angled building for a startling two-and-a-half minutes or hovers over two girls in a baroque swimming pool, their pale legs floating like seaweed beneath the water's rippling surface.

The imagery is bizarre, almost surreal; juxtapositions are aggressively inappropriate. A lightbulb glows until its glass skin is shattered by a straight razor; a puff of smoke and then the darkness. A man's drawn face is reflected in a pool of blood; a black gloved hand manipulates a curious collection of fetishized objects—children's toys, knives, bits of braided yarn—in disorienting close-up; a young woman reaches into the shallow puddle where her keys have fallen only to see her arm vanish into water up to the elbow. A woman's shiny red high heel in a boy's screaming mouth, the blue sky above, the white sand below.

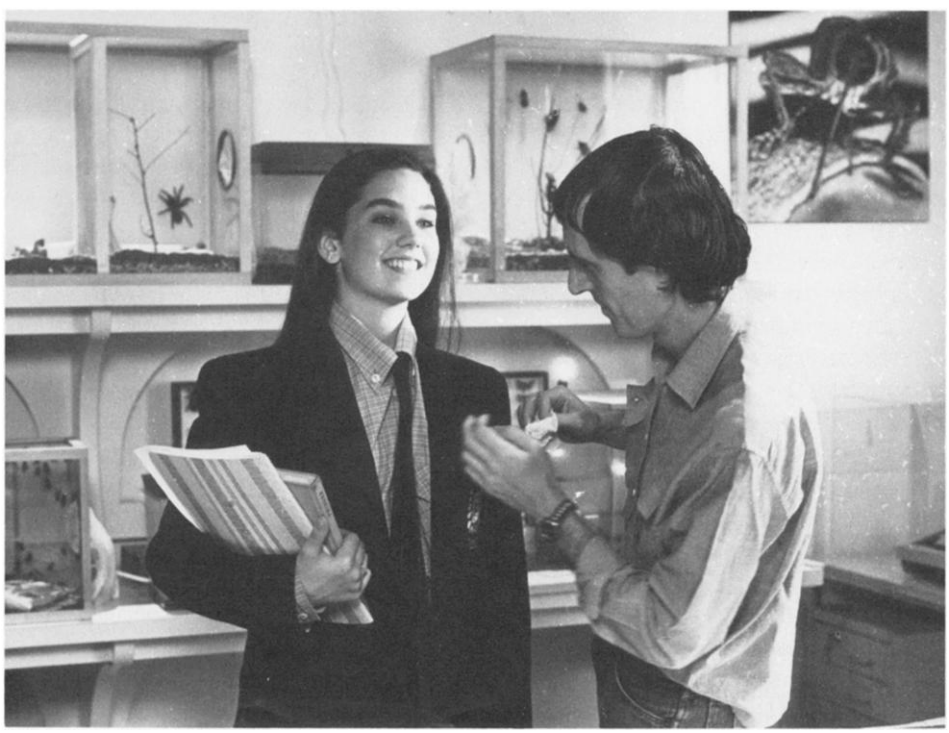
The world of Dario Argento is one of twisted logic, rhapsodic violence, stylized excess; it is true Twentieth-Century Gothic with all the inversion, formal imbalance, and riotous grotesquerie the term can encompass. His is a romantic vision, informed by an instinctive appreciation of the contradictory nature of erotic appeal: Argento's camera is alternately enthralled and repelled by ripe flesh and blood-drenched fantasy. A film such as *Tenebrae* (1982) or *Deep Red* (1976) peels back the skin and exposes a phantasmagoric maelstrom of secret desires and dreams of death and night and blood. Argento's talents are peculiar and his consistent interest in the horror/thriller genre[1] has not won him widespread critical acclaim. This is not to say that no genre director is ever taken seriously; Hitchcock is now almost universally revered and his foremost acolyte, Brian de Palma, has always been treated seriously if not necessarily favorably. Consider the Davids Lynch and Cronenberg, whose most recent films—*Blue Velvet* and *The Fly* (both 1986)—have been accorded mainstream accolates that would have been unthinkable for *They Came from Within* (Cronenberg, 1976) or even cult favorite *Eraserhead* (Lynch, 1977). Granted, theirs are still dangerous visions, overdetermined fantasies of treacherous flesh and deadly sex. Lynch's hot flashes from the heart of darkness and Cronenberg's doomed love stories for the plague years will never please all the critics—or all the audiences—all the time. But they are noted, discussed, and examined. Argento's films are largely ignored.

Perhaps his assaults on linear logic are too thorough-going; perhaps the hollow, extradiegetic quality of his post-dubbed sound tracks is too disconcerting to the unaccustomed ear; or perhaps there is just too much cerebral drugginess in the air when *Inferno* (1980) or *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (1972) is on the screen. The secret puritans in Cronenberg and Lynch—who for all their evident fascination are also clearly appalled by the things that crawl out when they turn over rocks—build penance into the package: images aslime with pus and slobber, dissonant sound tracks, vistas of bruised and deformed flesh undermine the perverse pleasures of the text. Argento murders and maims and splatters blood with abstract abandon, revelling in the mayhem with glorious unself-consciousness; he is a hedonist who finds his pleasures in unacceptable places and has no compunction about letting everyone in on the fun.

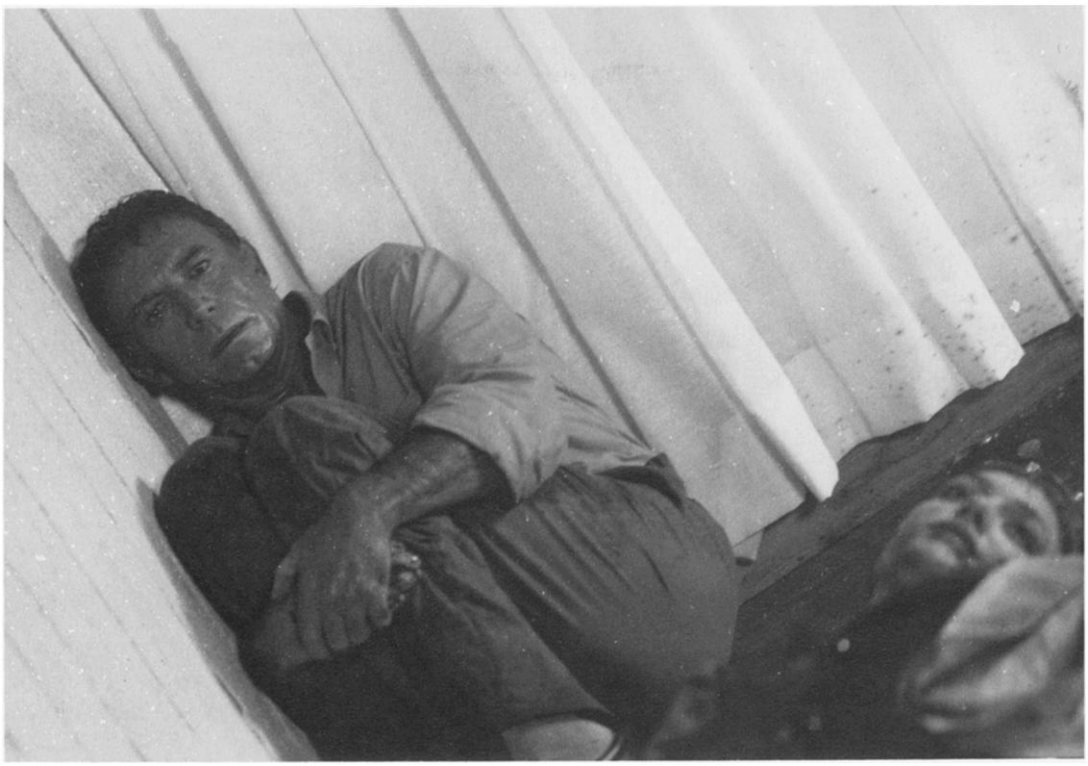
Since 1970 Argento has written (or co-

INFERNO

written) and directed eight horror films whose visual density is extraordinary; their intricate storylines—improbable and deceptive—are systematically sublimated to a *mise-en-scène* whose escalating complexity is characterized (though only partially defined) by baroque stylistic devices that include bizarre camera angles, convoluted pans and tracking shots whose narrative motivation is woefully inadequate to their extravagance, aggressively unnatural color, jarring shot transitions, and obtrusively off-kilter compositions within the frame—all of which conspire to delineate a diegetic world gone mad. The titles themselves are memorable: *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage/L'Ucello Dalle Piumi di Cristallo* (1970), *The Cat O'Nine Tails/Il Gatto a Nove Coda* (1971), *Four Flies on Grey Velvet/Quattro Mosche de Velluto Grigio, Deep Red/Profondo Rosso, Suspiria* (1977), *Inferno, Tenebrae/Tenebres* and *Creep-*



Dario Argento with Jennifer Connolly on the set of PHENOMENA *(US title:* CREEPERS*)*



TENEBRAE

ers/Phenomena (1985). The body of work they constitute is problematic in many respects, from the often perfunctory plotting to the post-production dubbing that—while common practice in Argento's native Italy—drives many viewers to distraction. By mainstream standards, Argento has never made a "good" movie, which is to say that he has never made a film that conforms to conventional rules of naturalistic characterization, plausible plotting, narrative closure or suitable stylistic decorum. Indeed, there is something genuinely unnerving about the demented *mise-en-scènes* Argento develops from film to film, and if the psychedelic *Suspiria* passed the electric koolaid acid test at the box office, the icy *Tenebrae* never even made it into the arena. To reclaim him critically would be easier were he not so wholeheartedly committed to this disreputable genre. Francis Ford Coppola's *Dementia 13* (1963) is a historical curiosity in a career that went on to produce *Apocalypse Now* and *Rumble Fish,* but Argento has never shown any sign of wanting to go on to bigger and better things—just bigger and better horror films. But to the post-modern sensibility there is an almost inevitable appeal to films that care so much for form and so little for thematic substance, that don't so much walk as *caper* on the wild side.

A substantial part of the appeal of Argento's films lies in the fact that they are supremely self-aware, flagrantly theatrical, and unafraid to manipulate various conventions of the commercial narrative cinema. As with Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*—much maligned when originally released, reclaimed on revisionist assessment—one sees in Argento's films "an obviousness of systems"[2] that invites—indeed, demands—investigation. Argento's unmistakable visual style is enticing enough, but there is also the range of allusion that extends from visionary writer Thomas De Quincey to Alfred Hitchcock; a web of intertextual references that links the films on images of perverse sexuality and extreme violence, water, curtains and vast quivering eyes; flashbacks and dreams interrupt the flow of the narrative, disorienting close-ups and high-angle longshots disrupt any sense of continuous internal space established by Argento's ever-restless camera eye. To see the oneiric phallocentricity—visually manifest in an abundance of knives, razors, sword canes, axes, and

Central Park through an Argento-eye lens: INFERNO

sundry sharp things—of *The Cat O'Nine Tails* or *Tenebrae* is to scurry to the Freudian notion of the dreamwork (the activity through which, by the processes of displacement and condensation, disturbing thoughts are transformed into the fantastic material of dreams) to make sense of these children's gardens of perversity. *Suspiria* and *Inferno,* with their pervasive images of fire and water conflated into apocalyptic mandalas, beg for discussion in terms of Jungian archetypes. The insistant defamiliarizing effect of Argento's visual trademarks suggests that a formalist and/or structuralist approach to the text would be rewarding . . . if not endless, the possibilities are at least numerous.

With the exception of *Suspiria* and *Inferno,* Argento's films are all *gialli,* psychological/detective thrillers whose overt concerns are the mechanics of crime and punishment. Yet he rejects the model of the classical mystery in favor of something less reassuring, more chaotic. Tzvetan Todorov has divided the literary detective genre into two distinct categories defined by the relationship between the double story present in every such work of fiction: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. In the first type, the who-done-it, the first story is over before the second begins: a man is dead and someone must uncover the facts: who, what, when, where, and why? In the second type, the *"serie noir,"* the two stories are fused; it "suppresses the first and vitalizes the second."[3] The *giallo,* often criticized for its flaws as a who-done-it, is in fact more closely related to the *film noir* and Argento takes the form to its outer limits in his films. Their complex internal logic is connotative rather than denotative, metaphoric rather than metonymic; images proceed from one to another not in the service of a linear narrative that must be advanced but rather by way of "poetic" connections, a kind of alchemical reasoning. Argento's *gialli,* their stories relegated to the status of skeletal framework, their diegeses encrusted with signifiers, belong to the realm of the Barthesian writerly text as surely as more conventionally "diffi-

Jennifer Connolly falls into a slimy pool of maggots in PHENOMENA *(US title:* CREEPERS*)*

cult'' works as *Last Year at Marienbad, The Spider's Strategem* or *Blow-Up;* they venture into the realm of excess (what Barthes himself speaks of as the realm of ''obtuse reading,'' the third meaning[4]) without fear and revel in voluptuousness of what is all too often labelled incoherence. The *giallo* (the very name derives from the Italian equivalent of France's *Serie Noir,* distinguished by their yellow—*giallo*—jacket covers) does indeed look to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* for inspiration, but in the hands of skilled interpreters—like Argento and his mentor, Mario Bava—it is truly a genre of another color. Like Sergio Leone—with whom he worked on the story of *Once Upon a Time in the West*—Argento seizes upon the conventions of a disreputable genre and imbues them with a manic energy that almost cannot help but dismay viewers whose own sensibilities are more restrained. Yet it is this very lack of restraint that has won Argento much of his following. Beyond the oportunities for analysis, the fertile ground for critical exegesis, is the delirious sensibility that has at its center a sometimes exasperating love of baroqueness. Argento's dreams may be dark, but they are exhilarating.

If plot is not of paramount importance in Argento's films, it is none the less a striking element. He gravitates towards stories which have at their centers a paradoxical quest for solutions that once found—far from initiating the closure sought by classical mystery narratives—open up like poisoned blossoms whose petals are further disturbing questions. In *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* a writer stalks and is stalked by a murderer who hides behind a mask of mistaken perception and gender expectation as much as within the clichéd black gloves and slouchy hat of a hundred tired thrillers. The odd couple protagonists of *The Cat O'Nine Tails*—a crime reporter and a blind man who devises crossword puzzles—must find a killer whose motive is located equally within the untrustworthy files of a top-secret research facility (no object lesson in the value of primary sources here) and down the dirty backroads of a madman's mind. And a malevolent psychopath stalks the victim/hero of *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* from within the circle of his own nearest and dearest, for a reason that is almost no reason at all.Each entry in the ''animal trilogy'' (bird, cat, flies) takes a further step away from the world of *Psycho* and *Psycho*-esque thrillers, in which chaos eventually concedes to order and the roving camera eye is constrained by conventioned economies of means and purpose. But it is in *Deep Red,* his fifth feature and fourth *giallo,* that Argento's unique warp of mind comes clearly to the forefront. Released in the United States in 1976 shorn of some 20 minutes of its original running time (115 minutes), *Deep Red* enjoyed substantial popular—if not critical—success and continues to do so on videocassette under the unlovely title *The Hatchet Murders. Deep Red*'s screenplay by Bernardino Zapponi (co-author of Fellini's *Roma* and *Satyricon*) from a story by Argento is far denser and more richly textured than those of the director's earlier *gialli.* Though convoluted in the extreme, the plot may be briefly summarized as follows: Marc Daly, an English pianist living in Rome, returns home one night to find a depressed and drunken friend—Carlo, an Italian pianist with whom Marc sometimes works—loitering in the piazza before his apartment building. As they speak, a scream shatters the stillness of the night: one of Marc's neighbors, Helga, a noted psychic, is being murdered by a hatchet-wielding stranger. Marc is too late to help, though he sees something in the apartment that he is convinced contains a vital clue to the killing. He thinks it might have been a painting hung in the hallway but can't quite place it, and the thing is gone when he returns with the police. A newspaper story suggests that Marc can identify the killer and an attempt is made on his life, forcing him to conduct his own inquiry. It leads to a house, supposedly haunted, where he finds a childish drawing on a crumbling wall, a drawing of a screaming man covered with blood and a small boy clutching a gory knife. Further investiga-

Tony Musante in THE BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE

tion uncovers a sealed room containing the near-mummified body of a murdered man. These clues all lead to Carlo, for the body is that of his father and the scrawl the product of his childhood artistry; he dies fleeing the police. But, as Marc realizes after the fact, Carlo cannot have killed Helga. The real killer is Carlo's demented mother—who long ago murdered her husband before the horrified eyes of their child so that she would not be returned to an asylum—and Marc did indeed glimpse her face on the night of the murder, reflected in a mirror hung among paintings on the apartment wall. Marc only barely escapes her with his life, and the film's concluding image is his pale face reflected in a pool of her life's blood, stunned by the things he has seen and done; in the red depths he has discovered a world of thought and action he never dreamed existed and through whose scarlet veil he will forever gaze.

This story has features in common with that of *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage;* each begins with a crime witnessed by the impotent protagonist and revolves around a clue which makes no sense until it is provided with the proper, near-fantastic context, and in each case the context is supplied only at the expense of an investigation which very nearly costs the protagonist his life and sanity. There is in each a false solution, close enough to pass for the truth except for some detail, and there is the *second* solution—the solution that overturns its predecessor and with it the protagonist's sense of the order of the world. But while *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* is a relatively self-contained film, *Deep Red* casts out allusions in all directions. In particular, the casting of David Hemmings as Marc Daly indisputably evokes *Blow-Up,* the classic mystery without a solution, the mystery that seems to be about one thing—a motive, a murder, a missing body—and turns out to be about something else altogether: the ultimate impossibility of *knowing,* a heady philosophical concern indeed.

In *Deep Red* Hemmings is again the artist *cum* detective, but in Argento's universe he is also provided with a *Doppelgänger* in the person of Carlo. With this formal device Argento in effect doubles the stakes, imbuing his story with a bipartite level of meaning that it would not otherwise have. Though each character possesses full diegetic reality and they bear no conventional doubling relationship to one another—they are not siblings, lovers, namesakes, nor do they bear any physical resemblance to one another—Marc and Carlo are linked through

DEEP RED *(US title:* THE HATCHET MURDERS*)*

circumstance and detail in a number of ways, and this linkage is so obsessive and pervasive that it demands structural resolution. Most obviously, of course, they are both defined by artistic avocation: each is a pianist with a predilection for American jazz, though neither is in fact from the United States—Marc is English and Carlo, Italian. In one sequence—which opens with a close-up of four hands, two identical pairs, on a piano keyboard—they actually play a duet in which their respective parts are precise echos of one another.[5] In addition, both are substantially defined in sexual terms and those terms presented as disjunctive. Carlo is not just homosexual (like, say, the gay detective Arrosio of *Four Flies*); he is sexually tormented. When Marc—concerned for Carlo's well being—comes to visit him at the apartment of his lover Massimo, Carlo's immediate reaction is sardonically defensive. Drunk again, he alludes to his "strange sexual tastes"[6] and to having been "caught in the act"; his evident self-loathing and reflexive destructiveness makes him react to condemnation where in fact none exists. Marc for his part is the subject of an endless stream of sexual innuendo. The police inspector charged with investigating Helga's murder suggests slyly that being a musician is no sort of a job for a real man, while Gianna—a female reporter with *cojones* to spare—taunts him at every opportunity. She dares him to arm-wrestle, beats him and giggles at his dismay (while he whines that she cheated); when she assures him that he is a "big . . . strong . . . *man*" there is no doubt but that she means something else. It is Gianna too who initiates this exchange (in the guise of friendly banter): "You may not believe this, but I don't have a boyfriend right now." "Me either," replies Marc absently. "I should hope not!" she leers, leaving him to protest weakly (in a context in which any protests is doomed to seem too much) "I *meant* a girlfriend," while she demands to know why he can't keep his hands from shaking. Artistic temperament, Marc counters, but the point is already lost.[7]

Although they are the nominal centers of the narrative, Marc and Carlo are both rendered helpless, ineffectual, at every turn. Carlo is introduced in a scene in which he is almost paralytically drunk, while Marc's first action is his attempt to save his neighbor from being murdered. He fails. Carlo's only contribution to *Deep Red*'s considerable mayhem is stabbing Gianna (he takes her by surprise and she doesn't even die); when he confronts Marc face-to-face moments later he can do little more than threaten, even though he has a gun and Marc is unarmed and alone. Significantly, however, Marc cannot actively save himself from Carlo—he stalls for time until the police arrive and Carlo runs away. Marc is humiliated by Gianna's car, both by a faulty door and a passenger seat that locks in a position so low that he can barely peer over the dashboard;[8] it goes without saying that Gianna always drives. He is beaten and left for dead in a burning building (Gianna pulls him to safety) and crippled by Carlo's deranged mother, who buries a hatchet in his shoulder. Since Marc has previously placed great emphasis in conversation with her on the fact that he is a *pianist* this wound (which at the very least will prevent him playing for some time to come) takes on additional significance. Though it is his investigation that propels forward *Deep Red*'s narrative, Marc is constantly presented not as an active force, but as a reactive one. And if Carlo's perception of the world is colored by the childhood trauma of his father's death (in which he was himself implicated when he picked up the bloody knife), then Marc's is no less patriarchal. When Gianna asks banteringly why he chose to become a pianist, he replies, "Well . . . my psychiatrist would say it's because I hated my father; because when I bang the keys I'm really bashing his teeth in." He is joking, of course, but it is the joke that conceals the truth. Marc and Carlo have both been driven blood simple by the specter of red death, poisoned by the miasma of a past that travels with them—wher-

ever they go, there they are. Twin blood moons in *Deep Red*'s diegetic sky, Marc and Carlo are an elegant example of the duality that is pervasive in Argento's work.

Not content with registering his thorough dislike of *Deep Red*'s narrative, one New York critic went on to declare Argento "simply a director of incomparable incompetence." This is not an atypical assessment—Argento is handicapped not only by genre, but also by national conventions and a stylistic flamboyance for which many American and British reviewers do not care—but in light of *Deep Red*'s rigorous structural formalism it is an insupportable one. One need only look as far as the film's credit sequence and opening scenes for the eloquent demonstration of the methodology that inflects the film as a whole.

The major credits appear as white type against a black background, accompanied by a bass-dominated score based on throbbing sequential notes. *Salvatore Argento and Rizzoli Films Present a Dario Argento Film with David Hemmings, Daria Nicolodi—Deep Red.* They are followed by a list of names, the first supporting players: *Gabriele Lavia, Macha Meril, Eros Pagni, Giuliana Calandra, also with Glauca Mauri and with the Participation of Clara Calamai. Story and Screenplay by Dario Argento and Bernardino Zapponi.* At this point the music segues into a child's thin voice singing a wordless tune as an image fades in from black: there is a room and a Christmas tree; against the back wall two shadows struggle. There is a scream, and the shadows disappear. A knife, its blade smeared with blood, is thrown into frame left; into frame right walk a pair of child's legs and feet, clad in dazzling white socks and black patent shoes. The image fades back to black and the childish singing segues back into the rock score that accompanies the rest of the credits. Following *Directed by Dario Argento,* the screen is black for several seconds. The music stops entirely and there is silence. When an image reappears it is weirdly off-center and does not fill the screen; the score is anachronistic mid-sixties jazz. The camera pans left, revealing the off-center image as an image fragment—as the pan continues the image vanishes and reappears as the camera passes a series of obstructions before coming to rest in long shot on a group of musicians; they are rehearsing in what appears to be an abandoned

DEEP RED

theater. At a sign from the pianist (Marc, though he has not yet been introduced and will not be until several scenes later) they stop playing. He begins to speak and the camera tracks in, ending up on a close-up of his face. "Okay, that was fine, good . . . very good. Maybe too good; too precise, too formal . . . you need to throw it away, make it distinctive. Remember, this kind of jazz was born in . . . (he hesitates slightly) . . . bordellos."

Already, having seen only the credits and two brief scenes (one of which is scarcely a scene at all—more a vignette), one is disoriented. The vignette which interrupts the credits poses a slew of questions. What exactly has happened? Something violent, certainly; there is a knife and there is blood. Is someone dead? Who? Who killed him or her? The child—was he or she (the legs and feet could belong equally to a small boy or girl) witness to something dreadful? Or did he or she do something dreadful? Is the child singing, or are we hearing someone or something (a record, the radio) else? When did this thing happen? The child's clothing—what little we see of it—doesn't look particularly contemporary, but the Christmas tree signifies a special occasion. Perhaps we are seeing a pampered child dressed up to suit fussy adults. Did anything even really happen at all? Perhaps this was a dream or a fantasy of some kind. And why is this snippet of a scene so important that it intrudes upon the unfolding of the credits? If all the credits were superimposed over this scene it would be a conventional enough way of presenting the information, but the first credits appear over a straightforward black field underscored by their own theme music. The scene—which even has its own, very different music—is speaking out of turn; the credits are suspended

for its duration, resuming only after the last echoes of the childish tune have faded away.

When the credits conclude there is a moment of suspended silence before the dark screen again gives way to an image. It bears no obvious relationship to the bloody vignette, and when its fragmented space is resolved into something conventional (an ordinary space made to appear discontinuous because the camera's view is obstructed) it contains a group of adult figures, musicians rehearsing. They provide a diegetic source for the jazzy score—which is as unlike the credit theme as the child's singing—but are not shown in the series of close-ups that would make them into characters. They are just shapes. Even when one is singled out, he is not given a name (no one calls out from off-screen, "Hey Marc—how did that sound," or something of the kind); as soon as he is isolated by the camera's roving eye it sets about making him into a fragment by way of the relentless inward track. By the scene's close he is just a face, isolated in a close-up that is the inverse of the close-up that concludes the vignette—the child's feet.[9] Perhaps he is the child of the previous segment grown up; the proximity of the scenes suggests such a reading, as do the formal matching of the inverted close-ups and the presence under each of significant music that is not part of the film's overall musical theme. Further, this scene — which offers no answers — raises another issue that, even if it does not register here consciously, asserts itself throughout the film: that of a kind of vague, pervasive sexual uneasiness. In his brief monologue, Marc hesitates (not once, but twice) before speaking the word "bordello." Why should this be so? He is not in mixed company (and the idea that if he were it would explain things presupposes that Marc is a very old-fashioned kind of gentleman), and it is probably safe to assume that most musicians know the roots of jazz lie in Southern whorehouses. What is the problem here? And need it be said that were there an answer to this question contained within the cinematic text, *Deep Red* would be a very different kind of film?

The third scene in *Deep Red* follows directly on the second, linked on the camera's tracking motion, which ends on a glass door reading "European Congress on Parapsychology." There is a cut to a long shot of an anteroom, then the camera tracks aggressively up to a set of heavy red drapes, flings them open and proceeds down the center aisle of an auditorium. Three people (two men and a woman) are seated behind a table on stage; one man is saying, "butterflies, termites, zebras; all these animals and many, many others use telepathy to transmit orders and relay information . . ." There is a cut to a high-angle shot—apparently taken from a visible balcony—then a series of cuts to the figures on stage and various members of the audience. One man whispers something to another who laughs; a man fiddles with what appears to be a hearing-aid but is in fact a radio; a sinister priest theatrically lowers his cigarette. Helga Ulmann, a noted psychic, addresses the audience and provides a demonstration of her telepathic gifts, correctly naming a stranger in the audience and identifying some objects in his pocket from the stage. She can, she explains, hear a thought even as it is being formed, though she knows nothing of the future—her powers have nothing to do with magic. A strange look passes over her face and she screams. "I can feel . . . there's in this room . . . I can feel a presence, a twisted mind sending me thoughts. Perverted, murderous thoughts . . . go away! You have killed and will kill again! There's a child singing and that house . . . blood, all blood. I'm scared. I'm scared." The cut is to a point-of-view shot from the audience. The camera rises and begins to ease out of a row of seats towards a side door marked "WC"; this is followed by a cut to the center aisle, as the camera tracks backwards and the red drapes pull shut behind it, completely blocking the view of the auditorium. All the while, Helga continues to speak in voice-over. ". . . We must hide everything, everything in the house . . . that's the way it was . . . no one must know. No one! Forget it . . . forget it . . . forever . . . forever . . ." Another cut takes us into the bathroom—there is the clatter of hollow heels on the floor, and the sound of someone retching. The camera pans up from the sink (water, round metal drain) to the mirror above: it is old and discolored and the reflection in its mottled surface is unreadable. A man asks if he should get some help and is rebuffed. Finally, there is a cut to Helga and one of her associates, Giordani, speaking in the now empty auditorium; the camera crouches down behind a pillar. She says that she will write down all she sensed that af-

ternoon and give it to him the next day; she also reveals that she knows the name of the person whose mind she contacted.

Though this scene is extended and contains a great deal of information, it does little to clear up the questions raised by those preceding. One thing is apparent: the bloody vignette happened at some time in the past and at least one person connected with it is still alive. He or she was present in the auditorium and Helga has glimpsed the secret sin of the past—it interrupts her routine paranormal perceptions[10] as rudely as the earlier vignette displaced the routine reading of the credits. Throughout, the camera has constituted an aggressive, yet disturbingly inconsistent witness to events. The first shot of the scene in the auditorium completes a track begun in the scene at the jazz rehearsal, implying a continuous—if unidentified—point-of-view. But the track down the aisle is disrupted by a series of shots taken from all over the auditorium: from both sides of the balcony, behind the onstage speaker's dais, overlooking various segments of the audience; the camera leaps to a high angle over the stage and then zeros in for a close-up of Helga's mouth before assuming the point-of-view of an individual in the audience. Moments after the conspicuous POV walk to the bathroom, there is another track—this time *up* the center aisle. The result is wildly disorienting: the shifting "voice" of the camera makes it impossible to get a fix on *Deep Red*'s mode of articulation. The sequence which follows does not alleviate this condition.

From the long shot of Helga and Giordani, Argento cuts to an extreme close-up of an object isolated in darkness: a dollhouse cradle. The throbbing theme music of the credits sequence fills the sound track as the camera begins a swirling, uninterrupted pan over a series of objects—some innocuous, some disturbing, all given sinister significance by the camera's relentless gaze. The cradle is tipped over by an unseen hand; its contents spill and the camera wheels away, past a red yarn doll, its torso stuck with pins, a child's drawing of a woman, a huge knife stuck through the paper, a metal figurine, wool braids, a naked baby doll (lifted suddenly out of frame by the black-gloved hand glimpsed in the preceding sequence, in the bathroom), a red clay demon, marbles and two slender switchblade knives. There is a cut to an extreme close-up of a vast quivering eye, gazing

DEEP RED

sightlessly into the lens as it is ringed with black eye make-up; only the tip of the applicator brush is visible.

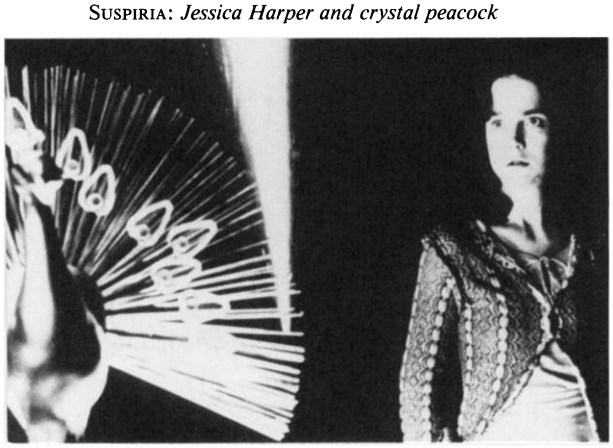
Once again, more questions are raised than answered. Is the owner of the vast eye also the owner of the twisted mind? Once again, is it a man or a woman? Make-up implies a woman, but wasn't the warped mind in the men's room? There was a man there, at any rate. The crudeness with which the make-up is applied does not suggest cosmetics—rather, it implies war paint, military camouflage. And what are the objects we have just seen—do they even really exist, or are they symbols, fetishes, concrete manifestations of the images that crowd a disordered brain?

In four scenes lasting a total of 8-1/2 minutes, the first four of the film—one of which is no more than a tantalizing fragment—*Deep Red* establishes a pattern of deceptive speech that will characterize its articulation throughout. It raises questions on a variety of levels and refuses to answer any of them. There are questions about story: who did what, when, where, and why? Questions about technique: how is it done and why is it foregrounded, if not in the service of some narrative end? Questions about structure: if the images don't fit together logically (giving first a general picture of what is going on then filling in the details) but are also not part of some abstract montage, then what is the pattern? One often speaks of the imaginary geography of film, but the Rome in which *Deep Red* is set is not merely the product of cinematic expediency: it is a city imagined by a maniac. The camera wanders according to compulsions as unfathomable as the motivations of the film's psychopathic killer; the sound track erupts into atavistic syncopation

according to some cue that is not shared with the viewer. *Deep Red* is a ritual in transfigured space, taking the viewer on a secret journey that is all the more startling because it takes place within the context of an exploitation horror film.

There is much more that can be said about *Deep Red.* Like *Blow-Up,* it is informed by an obsessive interest in the process of representation, a fascination rooted in inherent mistrust of the veracity of the picture traditionally worth a thousand words. Where *Blow-Up* has Thomas's photographs, *Deep Red* has newspaper stills, paintings, drawings, and reflections in mirrors, all conspiring to paint a lying picture of people and events. If ultimately less metaphysically oriented—there is never any question as to the reality of the bodies Marc stumbles across—*Deep Red* nevertheless dabbles in notions of fate and the abysmal nature of the word concealed beneath the safety of surfaces. It is also the first of Argento's films to enter truly into the realm of Barthesian excess—though excessive elements litter the animal trilogy—displacing the emphasis of scene after scene from the narrative elements onto peculiar details that resonate way out of proportion to their overt importance. The multitextured musical score no longer functions in simple counterpoint to the imagery (as do the Ennio Morricone scores for Argento's first three films, juxtaposing lullabies with violent murders) but merges with it into a single structural element; in certain extended passages music completely replaces dialogue and diegetic sound as the aural component of the scene. *Deep Red*'s color is richer, more saturated than that of the previous films (with such a title it could hardly be otherwise); the camera takes on a freer, increasingly mobile role in relation to the action. *Deep Red* is bigger, brighter, more audacious than the animal trilogy; it paves the way for *Tenebrae*—arguably Argento's finest film, but unfortunately never released either theatrically or on videotape in the United States—while demonstrating conclusively that Argento, however maligned the genre within which he chooses to work, is a force to be reckoned with.

SUSPIRIA: *Jessica Harper and crystal peacock*



Argento followed *Deep Red* with *Suspiria* and *Inferno,* the first two parts of a projected trilogy inspired by an essay by Thomas De Quincey, "Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow." Genuinely oneiric in their imagery and distinguished by saturated, candy-colored cinematography, they revolve around the figures of the Three Mothers—Mater Lachrymarum (Mother of Tears), Mater Suspiriorum (Mother of Sighs) and Mater Tenebrarum (Mother of Darkness)—wicked sisters/stepmothers who generate the sorrows of the world from their shunned houses. Ultimately less disturbing than his *gialli*—to which he returned in 1982 with the ferocious *Tenebrae* and *Phenomena*—Argento's lurid fairy tales border on the hallucinogenic, which may be why *Suspiria* afforded Argento his greatest US box-office success to date. On the other hand it may not, since *Inferno* offers the same mix of minimal narrative and major visuals yet found itself branded "unreleasable" by distributor (and co-producer) 20th Century-Fox; it was first shown theatrically in the US in 1985 at a repertory cinema in New York. In addition to writing and directing his own films, Argento has entered into the occasional collaborative project. In 1978 he joined forces with George Romero for the sequel to *Night of the Living Dead,* working with him on the screenplay (his credit reads "script consultant") and providing part of the sound track with Goblin, the European synthesizer group he used to score *Deep Red* and *Suspiria.* Argento also had final cut control over the European version of the film, though Romero has said that in the end there was between Argento's cut and his only "a five-minute difference, and basically it's humor; he cut jokes that he thought wouldn't work with an Italian audience."[11] Argento has dabbled in music videos, making two to accompany selections from the score of *Phenomena:* Bill Wyman's (of the Rolling Stones) "Valley" and Claudio Simonetti's (formerly of Goblin) "Phenomena." Though attractive, there is little to distinguish these videos from

other such material. Far more substantial is Argento's contribution to Lamberto Bava's *Demons.* Argento's assistant director since *Inferno* and also a director—if not a particularly distinguished one—in his own right, Bava came to Argento to rework an original idea by Dardano Sacchetti (who co-wrote *The Cat O'Nine Tails*), and the script from *Demons* was a collaborative effort between Argento, Bava and Franco Ferrini, who co-wrote *Phenomena.* Not only does the narrative—concerning movie-goers trapped in a cinema of the damned, where the audience is turned one by bloody one into a hoard of slavering zombies by the malefic influence of the haunted screen—have the self-reflexive aspect found in much of Argento's later work, but the crew is made up in large part of veterans of his recent films. Produced by Argento's DACFilm, formed to produce *Phenomena, Demons* looks a great deal like the Three Mothers films, all saturated color and lurid lighting; if it is less compelling than any of Argento's own films, then it just goes to show that his distinctive style is not the whole of his appeal.

It is always tempting to overstate the virtues of a little-known film-maker in order to generate interest in his work; in Argento's case this is a dangerous undertaking. Though European writers—particularly in France—have long held that Argento is the master of his form, even they do not claim that his work is without substantial flaws. Even allowing for the degree to which narrative is made deliberately subordinate to *mise-en-scène,* it must be conceded that Argento can be a sloppy writer. It disturbs him not a bit that contemporary medical thinking wants no part of the nineteenth-century notion that a corpse's eye retains the last image seen before death. It suits the plot of *Four Flies on Grey Velvet*—in fact gives the film its title—and so it stays, as do all manner of weird science, dubious psychology, and unlikely physical coincidence, some felicitous and some not. Though one critic remarked (apropos *Suspiria*) that "the voice-overs . . . have a hollow eeriness—a calculated flatness—that really got to me and that I think was absolutely intentional, like the vocals on a Kraftwerk album," in fact the hollow post-dubbed sound tracks of all Argento's films are absolutely unintentionally defamiliarizing. He is adhering to standard Italian industry practice in post-dubbing all sound[12] and Americans are not used to the result; to our ears it sounds flat and unnatural and there is no rationalizing this fact away. But there is also no ignoring the grandiose peculiarity of Argento's vision or the often subtle and unexpected ways in which he toys with generic conventions. His unerring sense of the secret nastiness of the world is pulp sensibility at its most cruelly illuminating—if anyone could do justice on the screen to the novels of Jim Thompson it would be Argento—and his shameless delight in the plastic possibilities of the cinematic medium makes for heady viewing. Still a young man—he was 27 when his first film was released and is only 43 now—Argento has ahead of him many years in which to further explore the beauty in the darkness.

NOTES

1. Argento has made only one non-horror film during his career, the black comedy *Five Days of Milan* (1974), never distributed outside Italy.
2. Stephen Heath, "Film and System: Terms of Analysis" (Part 1), *Screen,* Volume 16, Number 1 (Spring 1975), p. 11.
3. "The Typology of Detective Fiction," *The Poetics of Prose* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), p. 45.
4. For a fuller explication of this notion, the reader is referred to the original essay, "The Third Meaning," *Image/Music/Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
5. This scene is one of those excised from the American print of *Deep Red.* Like many of the missing scenes, it matters little to the story proper but contributes substantially to the subtext.
6. This is a direct translation from the Italian sound track; in the English-language print Carlo calls himself a "faggot," losing the subtle implications of the remark but keeping the same sense.
7. Again, this dialogue is missing from the American print, and the scene in which it occurs is reduced to a snippet—Marc thanking Gianna ironically for drawing the murderer's attention to him by writing an article identifying him as the "eyewitness."
8. Gianna's car plays a larger role in the European version of *Deep Red* than it does in the American, but the outlines of its function are still visible.
9. This scene is missing entirely from the American print, which opens with the beginning of the next scene. The entire relationship of image and sound track is also grossly simplified, though the basic idea remains.
10. The phrase is oxymoronic, but contextually accurate.
11. Quoted by Donald Chase, "The Cult Movie Comes of Age: An Interview with George A. Romero and Richard P. Rubinstein," *Millimeter,* Volume 7, No. 10 (October 1979), p. 205.
12. Federico Fellini himself once explained that he often instructed his actors to pray during shooting—"Our Father" for stars, "Hail Mary" for everyone else—because their dialogue was not written until after principal photography had been completed.

"LOST" NELL SHIPMAN FILMS FOUND

Tom Trusky of Boise State University informs us that a VHS copy of Shipman's *A Bear, A Boy and a Dog* [see review of her autobiography in *FQ,* Summer 1987] is available from the Boise State University Bookstore, Boise, ID 83725. Six other "lost" Shipman films are owned by the university, and anyone interested in showing them should contact him c/o the English Dept. at BSU.

PETER HOGUE

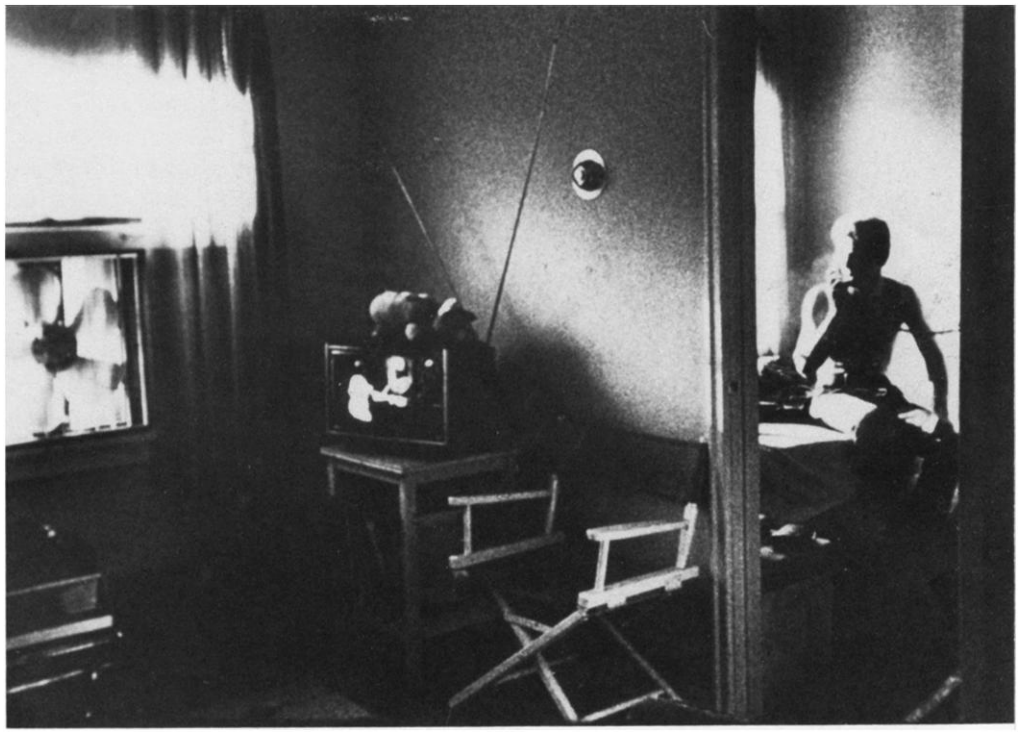
Last Chants and Slow Moves: Jon Jost's "Westerns"

In a remarkably productive career as a very independent film-maker, Jon Jost has built a body of work that is among the most distinctive and inventive of the last 20 years. What other American film-maker of his generation has ranged so widely and effectively through the possibilities of experimental and modernist film-making? Jost's work includes more than a dozen short films (which, seen as a group, form an extraordinary "diary" of youthful experiment and influence) and, by now, seven feature-length films—two of them being distinctly non-narrative in character and the other five bringing various "experimental" tendencies to bear on fundamental elements of American film narrative. The latter five—*Angel City* (1977), *Last Chants for the Slow Dance* (1977), *Chameleon* (1978), *Slow Moves* (1983), and *Bell Diamond* (1986)—are his most accessible films and his most mature accomlishments so far. Together they form a loose sort of five-panel portrait of the contemporary American West, and they are especially noteworthy as particularly lively counterforces to the classical Western genre's cultural legacy and as fresh, oblique commentaries on "Westernness" and American life in some of its Western-most forms.

Bell Diamond, the most recent of the group, confirms a shift toward domestic drama in Jost's work, and I'll hold off on discussing it until after an extended look at its four predecessors, all of which have clearer links to the Western and crime film genres. *Last Chants for the Slow Dance* chronicles the anomic journey of a pick-up-driving drifter to a pointless murder in the Montana wilderness; it's full of long takes and bleak visuals leavened by little more than Jost's mournful country-western songs on the sound track. *Angel City,* the most lavishly Godardian of Jost's features, uses Los Angeles settings and the kernel of a private-eye story for dissections of the West Coast social economy and the detective film genre alike; Jost's voice-over commentaries and the main character's direct address of the audience add several levels of discursiveness to the film's blatantly absurdist treatment of the private eye mythos. *Chameleon,* ranging over the LA art world and drug deals in the desert, also slides toward murder with deceptive casualness; it embraces the urban and the wilderness settings of the previous two films, and offers up a central character who might be a kind of composite of their respective main characters, but who also embodies the reptilian ambiguities suggested by the title of this one. *Slow Moves* gradually shapes itself as an outlaw ballad, a sidelong love story which concludes in robbery and violent death; the setting is Northern California and the sound track again has Jost's twanging songs providing a kind of Brechtian commentary.

Angel City is easily the most self-reflexive of the group, but all four have disruptive figures of style which provide a Brechtian distancing and call film narrative conventions and traditions into question. If the films touch on familiar film genres, they do so in ways that dismantle and deflect generic narrative patterns. All four place their chief characters in versions of America's "wide open spaces," and all four include killings among their most important events. But none of them channels its characters' spatial and moral errancy into any but the most elementary kinds of closure. Westerns and crime films, of course, customarily deal in the solving of mysteries and the restoration of (temporarily disrupted) moral order, but Jost's narrative ventures into these areas provide no such solutions. Rather, they lead us through an apparent absence of plot to a point where violent death poses a mystery—and, hence, forms a more or less direct challenge to the audience. Such elements, of course, do imply an "answer" of another sort: the unfinished aspect of the films (in both style and plot) is tacitly linked

For rental information on Jon Jost films, write to 1041 Minna, San Francisco, CA 94103; tel. (415) 431-0538.



LAST CHANTS FOR A SLOW DANCE

to forms of social thought and action which are themselves unfinished. In *Angel City,* Jost explicitly links the idea of "story" with the desire to know (via an etymological aside by the private eye), and the distancing devices of all four of these films seem aimed at a redirection of narrative toward knowledge (as opposed to pleasurable illusion).

Jost's unresolved plots subvert the Manicheanism of *film noir* and the mainstream Western, but his demystification of these "action" genres and their morality extends into his use of *temps morts* (via long takes) and his films' witheringly unromantic daylight world. From Southern California suburbs to Montana backroads, Jost's West is visualized in raw colors and harsh light. And crime in these movies is used as an ironic catalyst: their narratives *conclude* in crime, thereby confounding conventional viewer expectations and opening up the sorts of questions about social values and personal morality that genre films tend to treat in reductive fashion. The crimes give a semblance of focus and orderliness to the somewhat random events which precede them, but Jost's "open" forms and general disdain for the "well-made" film drastically reduce the potential for tight cause-and-effect relationships. Thus, it is at once useful and too easy to say that "social conditions" have led to these crimes: the emotional and economic frustrations in *Slow Moves,* for example, are manifest, yet there is no sense of necessity (dramatic or otherwise) leading up the male protagonist's fatal attempt at armed robbery. Rather, the disproportion between the character's inglorious death and the drab events preceding it seems to arouse a fundamental mixture of question and assertion: on the one hand, the ordinary "marginal" character finds himself driven to a deadly extreme; on the other, the exact nature of the drivenness remains to be discovered. In this way Jost's narratives tend to push the viewer toward a point where answers or explanations will come from a process of analysis that uses the film as a stimulus and starting point, but which ultimately relies on experience outside the movie theater as the basis for thought and action. Thus, the placement of crime in Jost's narratives creates a sense of urgency beyond the scope of the narrative itself: or rather, the self-effacing tendency of the films' stories harkens to an urgency which insists on the moral inadequacy of narration as a way of knowing.

The indeterminacy of Jost's narratives is characteristically underlined by strange figures of style: 360-degree pans in *Angel City* and *Slow Moves;* three 180-degree tilts in *Chameleon;* a time-warping overlay of color images on black-and-white footage in *Last Chants;* a spectacularly disorienting, quasi-abstract "camera obscura" sequence shot in *Slow Moves;* prolonged tracking shots and long takes in all four. All of these stylistic figures

Marshall Gaddis in Slow Moves

defy "narrative logic" via the disproportion between their visual prominence and impact and any narrative relevance they may have. But they also approach "pure" visual abstraction in a way that resituates narrative in the overall experience of the film: if much of what we're seeing *seems* to have narrative potential, the banality of Jost's narrative events combines with these near-abstractions to insist on a kind of viewing which stands outside simple narrative involvement and which is alert to the possibilities of experience and understanding which spill, first, beyond narrative and then beyond the film as a whole.

With help from Jost's songs and some drably discordant scenes between would-be lovers, *Last Chants* and *Slow Moves* both take shape as low-key "outlaw ballads." The stark Montana wilderness of the one and the damp, dead-end spaces of Northern California in the other provide desolating stages for the withering of the lone Western hero myth as well as the idea of the romantic couple's private saving world. The chief male characters in the two films spend a good deal of time with women, but both are ultimately solitary figures whose only adventures begin and end with violent death. In *Last Chants,* prolonged tracking shots with no particular destination underline the rootless and strangely static mobility of Jost's Westerners, and a similar feeling is at work in *Slow Moves* from the outset: the film begins with a conversation between two strangers on the Golden Gate Bridge, an "open" setting which is plainly confining, a route to "freedom" that is more hospitable to machines than to human discourse, and a concrete "lifeline" which is implicitly a site for suicide (solitary pedestrians who linger on this bridge are always at least mildly suspect) and explicitly a neighbor to imprisonment (Alcatraz is in the distance). The hard, spare visuals and directness of *Last Chants* make it the more impressive of the two in formal terms, but *Slow Moves* has perhaps the greater thematic richness. A *Last Chants* motel-room composition includes a glowing TV screen and a partial doorway view of a bedded couple, and the effect is one of desolating beauty. A companion sequence in *Slow Moves* contains a more patently "readable" and thus less stimulating composition whose deep-focus juxtapositions (a woman's head, near the camera; a liquor bottle; a TV set on the wall; a male pissing in a toilet on the opposite side of the room) make for a glum demystification of romantic love. But the dialogue in this somewhat pastiched scene makes for a startlingly ironic mingling of imagery: love, money, and the Boy Scout Code. The film's casually socio-economic approach to character psychology is enriched by the characters' own doubts (they agree to *not* use the word "love" because they "don't know what it means") and sense of irony (bills of paper currency are laid on the bed for each of the Boy Scout virtues, as the male enumerates them aloud). And so, when a character says, "Love makes me do things," *Slow Moves* puts over a sullenly incisive sense of how an eroticized consumer economics leaves people at a loss in face of their own desires and frustrations.

Angel City's private eye is lean and laconic and he sports a fairly wide-brimmed hat. His adventure takes him into the landscape of Southern California wealth and luxury rather than the Western badlands. The link between American wealth and crime is one of the film's transparent "mysteries" (in other words, it is an assertion), but here Jost is more concerned with the apparatus and corporate structure of the movie industry than with storytelling *per se.* The private eye Frank Goya (played by Bob Glaudini) steps in and out of character, or rather his is the character permitted to step outside the narrative to comment on it and directly address the audience. The film also includes a somewhat Warholesque "screen test" (ostensibly for a Hollywood remake of *Triumph of the Will*); a discourse on the terrorist psychology of advertising; a mock commercial for a fictional oil conglomerate; and, near the outset, Jost himself filmed in a mirror image and giving us

information and acknowledgments on the production of the film we've already begun to watch. In the discourse on the origins of narrative, Glaudini's Goya asks us to go "back to zero," and Jost uses the countdown numbers of the Academy leader as a distancing device which permits the film to end with the word START. This self-reflexiveness plainly contributes to a demystification of the general image which is "the movies" and of the particular image which is Los Angeles ("glazed in shabby myth/drunk upon the mirror/ tentacles outstretched/ an image, truly" in the words of one of Jost's voice-overs).

But the Academy leader device also suggests that the film is less than a movement "back to zero" than an exploration of a starting point: *Angel City* gives us a story (though one that distinctly has quotation marks qualifying it) while also providing angles of vision which make it clear why a filmed "story" about Los Angeles is likely to be a falsification. As the film plays with its various subjects (LA, private-eye narrative, capitalist economy), a series of extended tracking shots on freeways and Jost's incantatory voice-over observations give us the raw materials of a way of seeing that can separate itself from the interconnected myths of the American West, Los Angeles, and the film industry. When the private eye is "killed" by the mogul/criminal who has mistakenly hired him, Goya/Glaudini tells us he's "out of the picture": a quick cut literally removes him from the shot, and a reverse zoom reveals Jost, his camera and tiny crew, and the resting Glaudini on their street-side set (including a street mural which has been used as a kind of *tromp l'oeil* backdrop). Jost's refusal to conform to the myths of the American West and of the Hollywood genres also puts him "out of the picture," but *Angel City* is an elaborately playful demonstration that its particular way of being out of the picture affords an uncommonly stimulating vantage point.

Bob Glaudini in ANGEL CITY

Angel City's private eye lacks his conventional Hollywood counterpart's ability to control or shape events in some crucial way while also remaining innocent of his role in a created narrative, but the film is not merely indulging an inversion of genre conventions. Jost's use of the camera here ranges from an extended handheld "subjective" point-of-view shot to shots which seem to withdraw not only from the narrative but from the fact of production. In withholding the usual pleasures of narrative, Jost is attacking the illusory innocence of "realistic" narrative and its false neutrality. In *Angel City* in particular, Jost's avoidance of that innocent neutrality "entertains" the audience with the possibility that it can assume moral and political responsibilities well beyond the range of the passive consumption implied by the familiar film stories which would arouse us and then, as if responding to our private desires, restore the illusion of moral comfort and social well-being.

Chameleon also has a Southern California setting, and like *Angel City,* it offers a view of that region as a guilty western "paradise." This is a demythologized West that has been "won" by brute force, deeply entrenched economic power, and self-serving illusion. The central character (also played by Glaudini) is Terry, a deceptively gregarious wheeler-dealer, a quasi-bohemian who has ties to sixties radicalism and who gives signs of interests in art and literature; he is clearly an ingratiating insider in the LA art world, but he is also a drug dealer whose ruthlessness is made increasingly apparent as the film's action progresses. Indeed, one of the most effective aspects of *Chameleon* lies in its chillingly casual linkage of the worlds of art and crime. Terry moves easily in an atmosphere of artistic chit-chat and trendy preoccupations, but the disorienting camera style and a "blinding" close-up view of a mirror bearing cocaine and reflecting suburban sunshine make us wary of the "good vibes" tossed off by the art-world characters.

When the action moves into the desert for Terry's connection with his drug source, *Chameleon*'s Westernness is accentuated: the basic atmosphere at the drug supplier's landing-strip hide-out is roughly hippie/countercultural,

CHAMELEON

but the intrusion of a ranger on the federally owned airstrip leads indirectly to violence among the drug dealers. The abruptness of the hostilities is shocking in an almost too-pat way, but the fullest disturbance comes of the combination of this moment with an odd, disconnected glimpse of (presumably) the aftermath —Terry and a black confederate running naked through the desert, then Terry lying down (still naked) as the black man passes briefly into view. This is perhaps the most literal of the film's linkages of Terry and lizard imagery, though its implications are echoed and reworked in a later monologue in which Terry (again nude) self-consciously symbolizes his "chameleon" nature by smearing paint on his face and body.

These moments of nudity, one quite silent and the other almost obsessively voluble, are directly associated with murderous violence in the film, and they combine to give *Chameleon* its most provocative dimension: Terry represents a pointedly indigestible collision of American myths—the adventurous "cowboy" wanderer of the wastelands and the naked/liberated counter-cultural male, literally close to the earth, ostensibly free of ancient prejudices, and open to all the possibilities of his "personal space." The naked dash through the desert suggests a primal rite of some sort, but here as elsewhere Jost seems determined to avoid easy psychological explanations. Is this athletic nakedness a purge of murderous energy? or its continuation? or something else altogether? Those questions aren't "answered," but the film's disruptive venture into the territory of American myth is unmistakable. This mixture of gunplay and nakedness perhaps constitutes Jost's most effectively wide-ranging demystification of the landscape (psychic and otherwise) of American individualism and the macho fantasies that go with it.

Though women are certainly present in Jost's films, his feature-length work reflects a West in which males have an unchallenged but spurious preeminence (the great and crucial exception to this being the autobiographical *Speaking Directly,* which includes some harsh self-questioning on these matters). The secondary positioning of women in Jost's films seems an extension of his Westerners' immersion in values and myths which have destructive consequences in their lives. Money matters are repeatedly a source of difficulty between men and women in these films (though a shift in economic level deflects it in *Chameleon*). The rambling conversations between males and females (especially in *Last Chants* and *Slow Moves*) evoke a sense of alienated egos pursuing desires they don't particularly understand. The mock screen-test in *Angel City* underlines that film's sense of how women are assigned arbitrary and constricting role qualities—fetishized as consumer products.

Women's positioning in these films may also be a function of Jost's wariness of the culturally inscribed potential for voyeuristic fetishism in any film scene that involves a female participant. This potential is mocked by a hand-held "subjective" shot for a "seduction" in *Angel City* and turned inside out in *Chameleon* by a mock-lyrical long take in which the protagonist and a longtime friend self-consciously behave as if they were characters in a Hollywood musical. The latter sequence has special significance here in that, as Jost has sardonically noted, the woman's presence seems to have made it the rare long take in his films which film-industry executives find tolerable. The sequence, however, aims at a distancing of such unreflective readings not only through the unpolished performances but also through a separation of visuals (moving from close to distant) and sound (staying "close" throughout).

Slow Moves, meanwhile, addresses the issue of the problematically imaged woman through a complication of perspectives. There is the dim, bitter pathos surrounding a protagonist who finds himself uttering platitudes about women being "all alike" even as he clings desperately to a faltering relationship, and there is the by no means unsympathetic detachment of Jost's voice-over narrator on the subject of

this couple: "Like most people, they told each other stories . . . and, like most people, they did not tell their stories well." In the context of these four films, this implied link of failures (in both narration and relationships) takes the "botched" love affair of *Slow Moves* and its predecessors back to the notion of narrative as a form of investigation, of gaining knowledge. Jost's couples attempt to act out a "bad" story, one whose predigested roles can only leave its performers at an impasse marked by the absence of the knowledge to be found outside the myth or in its margins.

If Jost's films deny the pleasures that come from the "invisible" manipulation of familiar narrative forms, they also resist critical evaluation in terms of conventional entertainment "aesthetics." In some respects, the value of Jost's artistry will be clearest to those who share his sense of social urgency and the related assumption that film art must be reinvented or at least realigned. Full evaluation of his films may have to wait for a reinvention of critical/aesthetic vocabulary as well, but in the meantime, it is possible to see that Jost's "Western" features do offer a number of distinctive pleasures. These include the pleasures that have a longer history in modernist art than the general run of film criticism has ever acknowledged: self-aware pleasures, that is, whose sources include the "image of reality" rediscovered as the reality of the image; defamiliarized commonplaces (of the viewed world *and* of film viewing); the affirmation of the viewing audience's freedom (via the *made* work that could have been made differently); the excitement of investigation; the urgency of a fresh way of knowing.

Chameleon concludes with a remark from Terry ("Nothing to do with art, Vince—just dumb life") which helps define the peculiar space that Jost's films create for their viewers. These movies use narrative indirection as a means of speaking directly to audiences—the withholding of narrative connectedness and its pleasures tending to leave a void which can be filled only by direct recognitions and analysis of "dumb life" seen apart from the diversions and comforts of conventional art. Jost's art uses film, the present, and the Western landscape to provoke such confrontations and recognitions. That this unusual artistry must constantly reinvent itself is perhaps also a sign of the enormous difficulties that hinder our thinking about and acting upon such "obvious" realities.

Since the above was written, Jost has finished *Bell Diamond,* a feature shot in Montana with Marshall Gaddis, the nonprofessional male lead of *Slow Moves,* in the main role. The new film has much in common with *Slow Moves*—particularly in its emphasis on locale and an improvised narrative arising out of the experiences of people who have lived in such a place (the depressed city of Butte, in this case) and who also act in the film. These two films lack the stark, provocative brilliance of Jost's previous features, but their peculiar mixture of banality and jolting intelligence has a cumulative force that asserts itself most fully in the aftermath of viewing them (Jost, after all, has long since declared that a theater is not a particularly good place in which to *think* about movies—see his astonishing autobiographical feature film from 1972, *Speaking Directly*).

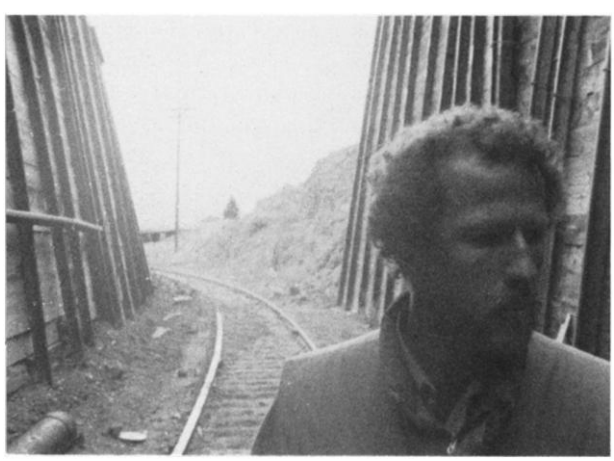
But these two most recent Jost "Westerns" also seem to mark a dilemma and a turning point in his film-making career. The recent pair embodies a kind of aesthetic stalemate in that their catalytic reliance on nonprofessional actors leaves them in a somewhat troubled territory of film experience—a territory bordered on the one hand by a well-meaning John Grierson-style cult of the ordinary and on the other by an ascetic purity that veers toward the films of Robert Bresson and Marcel Hanoun. The turning point comes of this partial blockage in the effectiveness of Jost's recent work and from a more pervasive economic blockage which has led Jost to consider taking up permanent residence in Europe, where he has had much greater success in finding an audience and adequate budgetary supports.

Both *Bell Diamond* and *Slow Moves* add a domestic factor to Jost's pictures of the American West. Both linger over the shoddy, rootless lives of their respective couples, and both provide raw glimpses of the need for a settled family life in characters who remain unsettled and rather solitary. And *Bell Diamond* expands dramatically on upon an idea touched on in passing in *Slow Moves*—a shared world of feeling among women—while also chronicling leakages of male emotion which disrupt facades of "Western" toughness and imply the bankruptcy of a whole way of life. The dazed stalemated males of *Bell Diamond* (the Gaddis

character and his working-class cohorts) veer between macho poses of indifference and almost childish bursts of unfocused emotion, and all of them have been hit by "the system"—through unemployment, the Vietnam War, or both. The gaps in these men's lives are quite obvious, but the film also implies that they are trapped in a schizophrenic sort of social psychology. *Bell Diamond* gives eloquent perspectives on this schizophrenia through its alternation of clumsy emotions amid domestic clutter and haunting lyrical views of Butte and environs. Indoors and out, this is a Western landscape which is blighted and whose traditionally celebrated beauties now evoke a monumental dead end. *Bell Diamond's* Butte is a paradoxical ghost town, a dead place whose inhabitants are still alive, however marginally. As such, Jost's Butte becomes a particularly desolate emblem of a West which is bankrupt in more than one sense of the word.

Bell Diamond has an abundance and range of dramatic incident that is new in Jost's work, and—like *Slow Moves*—it engages conventional narrative form in ways that tend toward kitchen-sink realism at its most obvious. The films' amateur casts also contribute to an impression of obviousness and banality, and Jost's against-the-grain directorial concepts are generally less evident, though by no means wholly absent, in these two films. Indeed, the peculiarities and problems of these two recent efforts at improvised, grass-roots film drama can be reflected in the observation that there are two almost totally different ways of describing them: (1) most immediately, as drably domestic realism, in which documentary and drama make a perplexing mixture of insight and commonplace, and (2) more in retrospect, a deceptive "collage" of everyday vicissitudes, which uses excesses of withdrawal and foregrounding as distancing devices.

Bell Diamond



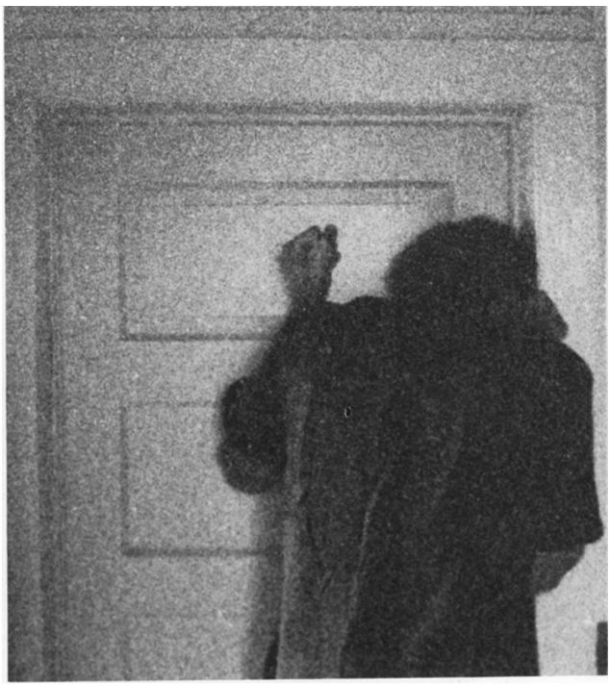
Bell Diamond seems to alternate between near-claustrophobic close-ups of domestic detail and distant, haunting views of Butte as an abandoned landscape. The blocked communication within a dead-ended marriage is enclosed in carefully framed views of the couple's immediate environment—shots which have no dialogue and which are held longer than is necessary for conventionally realistic renderings of mood and setting. In one deep-focus sequence, a pair of kitschy-looking slippers dominate the foreground of the frame in a way that seems to travesty the technique even as it evokes a striking mixture of comic warmth and emotional bleakness; it is an emblematic moment for a film in which raw compassion and chilling distance are frequent companions. And it is also a key example of the sort of thing that makes *Slow Moves* and *Bell Diamond* resemble anthologies of film style and which is, thereby, the cornerstone of a sort of antistyle: Jost reels out a full range of possibilities, from primary narrative build-up to sustained visual abstraction, and the result defies categorical responses of almost every sort.

The amateur actors and rudimentary dramatics of *Bell Diamond* are by no means totally offset by the film's moments of stylistic sophistication. Indeed, part of what is most extraordinary about it is Jost's refusal to either "polish" what is "crude" in it or to turn his back on his own inventiveness and skill. That doubled refusal is perhaps a major thread in a film-making career that has ranged from short experiments in "abstraction" to feature-length narratives, and in *Bell Diamond* it takes the form of simplicity and compassion which coexist with a modest but recurrent complexity of vision. Like the female artist who muses about painting in *Bell Diamond,* Jost is especially concerned with an approach which doesn't flatter its subjects and which shows us everyday things without capitulating to the received sense of "the usual."

Televised sports events provide a kind of framing device for the narrative as a whole—partly as if to say that this sort of media consumption is the lone focused activity in the main characters' household. And a radio call-in show is used similarly midway through the film, while also underlining a kind of pub-

lic/private split in the emotions of the various dispossessed males. A tender indirection and openness marks the sequences in which women converse with each other, while the conversations among males are viewed with a glaring harshness. Particularly in the artful indirection of a scene in an artist's studio, the rapport between women has an ease and an expanisveness which seem to transform the entire environment. And while this stands in stark contrast to the fragmentation and unease that emerge in the sequences involving the men's feelings, *Bell Diamond* yields more than simplistic contrast on such points: the most striking psychological pattern in the film has to do with the way several male characters behave in distinctly contradictory ways, as they lurch from macho disdain (in "intimate" moments) to incoherent mixtures of compassion and self-pity (when they are at greater distances from the initial emotion). Overall, *Bell Diamond* ranges from near-documentary (an elderly woman haggling fruitlessly over an unrefundable bus ticket) to routine two-shot realism (the Gaddis character in a dead-end counseling session with a female social worker) to expressively heightened dramatic moments (a surprisingly eerie outburst of hurt feelings among three half-drunk men talking and walking in an abandoned ore tunnel) to gentle, nearly abstract lyricism (a blank canvas in the women/studio sequence becomes a "screen" for a stunning bit of found archival footage, a nearly 360-degree panoramic view of Butte citizens circa 1920).

The ghosts of the Vietnam War are part of what is haunting the men in *Bell Diamond's* Montana. The Gaddis character's inability to conceive a child may be the consequence of exposure to Agent Orange, though the film is less explicit about this than it is in evoking the character's sense that his problems derive from the period of the war in general. The sharpest moment of reference to Vietnam comes in a moment where the three drinking companions clamber up and over abandoned mining machinery and one of them notes that they're at "a bad altitude"—i.e., the height at which a descending troop helicopter would have been most vulnerable to gunfire from the ground. Later, a fourth veteran will rant incoherently on the radio about the miseries of Vietnam survivors, and the point will be less the rant itself than a further twist in the pattern of emotional



BELL DIAMOND

contradictions in the male characters. Such contradictions merge with the Gaddis character's insistence that his marriage was "just fine" until his wife walked out on him, and they also provide yet another perspective on "Western" kinds of toughness and independence that are patently self-blinding and self-destructive.

Finally, *Bell Diamond* embodies a quandary of troubling and unsual interest. Jost sees his reliance on improvisation with nonprofessionals as a *political* act. But while his democratic gesture here does provide a sort of grassroots questioning of the authority given a (passively consumed) cinema of expertise, *Bell Diamond's* experimental dimension is at least partly neutralized by narrative and drama which gravitate toward cliché. In his eagerness to make contact with an authenticity that exists independently of his own artistic skills and originality, Jost has opened up his work to the kinds of simplistic views that it has sought to resist from its earliest stages. With all that's of exceptional interest in *Bell Diamond* and *Slow Moves,* I'm not convinced that either film has come fully to grips with what is a central dilemma for both of them. But this confrontation between the exceptional and the commonplace seems an entirely necessary development in Jost's career and work, and one hopes that his intelligence and skill will lead him to more fully satisfactory ways of dealing with it in and through his film work.

ESTHER C. M. YAU

Yellow Earth: Western Analysis and a Non-western Text

1984. China. The wounds of Cultural Revolution have been healing for nearly a decade. After the hysterical tides of red flags, the fanatical chanting of political slogans, and militant Mao supporters in khaki green or white shirts and blue slacks paving every inch of Tienanmen Square, come the flashy Toshiba billboards for refrigerators and washing machines, the catchy phrases of "Four Modernizations," and tranquilized consumers in colorful outfits and leather heels crowding the shops of Wangfujing Street. A context of Change. Yet contradiction prevails. Who are these people flocking to local theaters that posted *First Blood* on their billboards? Are they not the same group that gathered for lessons on anti-spiritual pollution? The Red Book and the pocket calculator are drawn from shirt pockets without haste, just like the old long pipe from the baggy pants of the peasant waiting for the old Master of Heavens to take care of the order of things. In 1984, after the crash of the Gang of Four, when China becomes a phenomenon of the "post" —a nation fragmented by and suffering from the collapse of faith in the modern, socialist politics and culture, the search for meaning by the perturbed Chinese character begins to occupy the electric shadows of new Chinese cinema.[1]

At the end of 1984, a few Chinese men who were obsessed with their history and culture—all of them had labored in factories and farms during the Cultural Revolution and just graduated from the Beijing Film Academy—quietly completed *Huang Tudi* in a very small production unit, the Guangxi Studio, in Southern China. A serious feature that had basically eluded political censorship, *Huang Tudi* (which meant *Yellow Earth*) was soon regarded as the most significant stylistic breakthrough in new Chinese cinema. It won several festival prizes, started major debates at home about filmmaking, and interested international film scholars.[2]

Safely set in the 1930s, *Yellow Earth* tells the story of an encounter between a soldier and some peasants. Despite its ambitious attempt to capture both the richly nourishing and the quietly destructive elements of an ancient civilization already torn apart in the late nineteenth century, the film's story and its use of folksongs/folktale as device and structure is deceptively simple and unpretentious. In fact, the film's conception and its musical mode were originally derived from one of the trite literary screenplays which glorified the peasants and the earlier years of socialist revolution: an Eighth Route Army soldier influenced a peasant girl to struggle away from her feudal family. Such a commonplace narrative of misunderstanding-enlightenment-liberation-trial-triumph or its variations would be just another boring cliché to the audience familiar with socialist myths, while the singing and romance could be a welcome diversion. Dissatisfied with the original story but captivated by the folk-tale elements, director Chen Kaige and his young classmates—all in their early thirties—scouted the Shaanxi Province in northwestern China for months on foot. Their anthropological observations of the local people and their subcultures both enriched and shaped the narrative, cultural, and aesthetic elements in the film.[4] Consequently, they brought onto the international screen a very different version of Chinese people—hardworking, hungry and benevolent peasants who look inactive but whose storage of vitality would be released in their struggles for survival and in their celebration of living. The structure of the original story was kept, but *Yellow Earth* has woven a very troubling picture of Chinese feudal culture in human terms that had never been conjured up so vividly before by urban intellectuals.

The film's narrative: 1937. The socialist revolution has started in western China, but most other areas are still controlled by the Kuomintang. Some Eighth Route Army soldiers are sent to the still "unliberated" western highlands of Shaanbei to collect folk tunes for army songs. Film begins. Spring, 1939. An Eighth Route Army soldier, Gu Qing, reaches a village in which a feudal marriage between a young bride and a middle-aged peasant is taking place. Later, the soldier is hosted in the cave home of a middle-aged widower peasant living with his young daughter and son. Gu Qing works in the fields with them and tells them of the social changes brought about by the revolution, which include the army women's chances to become literate and to have freedom of marriage. The peasant's daughter, Cui Ciao, is interested in Gu Qing's stories about life outside the village, and she sings a number of "sour tunes" about herself. The peasant's son, Han Han, sings a bed-wetting song for Gu Qing, and is taught a revolutionary song in return.[5] The young girl learns that her father has accepted the village matchmaker's arrangement for her betrothal. Soon, the soldier announces his departure. Before he leaves, the peasant sings him a "sour tune," and Cui Ciao privately begs him to take her away to join the army. Gu Qing refuses on grounds of public officers' rules but promises to apply for her and to return to the village once permission is granted. Soon after his departure, Cui Ciao's feudal marriage with a middle-aged peasant takes place. At the army base, Gu Qing watches some peasants drum-dancing to soldiers going off to join the anti-Japanese war. Back in the village, Cui Ciao decides to run away to join the army herself. She disappears crossing the Yellow River while singing the revolutionary song. Another spring comes. There is a drought on the land. As the soldier returns to the village, he sees that a prayer for rain involving all the male peasants is taking place. Fanatic with their prayers, nobody notices Gu Qing's return, except the peasant's young son. In the final shots he rushes to meet

the soldier, struggling against the rush of worshippers. End of story.

Yellow Earth poses a number of issues that intrigue both censors and the local audience. The film seems to be ironic: the soldier's failure to bring about any change (whether material or ideological) in the face of invincible feudalism and superstition among the masses transgresses socialist literary standards and rejects the official signifieds. However, such an irony is destabilized or even reversed within the film, in the sequences depicting the vivacious drum-dancing by the liberated peasants and the positive reactions of the young generation (i.e., Cui Ciao and Han Han) towards revolution. The censors were highly dissatisfied with the film's "indulgence with poverty and backwardness, projecting a negative image of the country." Still, there were no politically offensive sequences to lead to full-scale denunciation and banning.[6] To the audience used to tear-jerking melodramas (in the Chinese case, those of Xie Jin, who is by far the most successful and popular director),[7] *Yellow Earth* has missed most of the opportune moments for dialogue and tension, and is thus unnecessarily opaque and flat. For example, according to typical Chinese melodrama, the scenes where Cui Ciao is forced to marry an older stranger, and the one when her tiny boat disappears from the turbulent Yellow River, would both be exploited as moments for pathos. But here they are treated metonymically: in the first, the rough dark hand extending from off-screen to unveil the red headcloth of the bride is all one sees of her feudalist "victimizer"; in the second instance, the empty shots of the river simply obscure the question of her death. In both situations, some emotional impact is conveyed vocally, in the first by the frightened breathing of the bride, and in the second by the interruption of her singing. But the cinematic construction is incomplete, creating an uncertainty in meaning and a distancing effect in an audience trained on melodrama and classical editing. Nevertheless, when the film was premiered at the 1985 Hong Kong International Film Festival, it was lauded immediately as "an outstanding breakthrough," "expressing deep sentiments poured onto one's national roots" and "a bold exploration of film language." Such an enthusiastic reception modified the derogatory official reaction towards the film (similar to some initial western reception, but for different political reasons), and in turn prompted the local urbanites to give it some box-office support.[8]

Aesthetically speaking, *Yellow Earth* is a significant instance of a non-western alternative in recent narrative film-making. The static views of distant ravines and slopes of the Loess Plateau resemble a Chinese scroll-painting of the Changan School. Consistent with Chinese art, Chang Imou's cinematography works with a limited range of colors, natural lighting, and a non-perspectival use of filmic space that aspires to a Taoist thought: "Silent is the Roaring Sound, Formless is the Image Grand."[9] Centrifugal spatial configurations open up to a consciousness that is not moved by desire but rather by the lack of it—the "telling" moments are often represented in extreme long shots with little depth when sky and horizon are proportioned to an extreme, leaving a lot of "empty spaces" within the frame. The tyranny of (socialist) signifiers and their signifieds is contested in this approach in which classical Chinese painting's representation of nature is deployed to create an appearance of a "zero" political coding. Indeed, the film's political discourse has little to do with official socialism; rather, it begins with a radical departure from the (imported) mainstream style and (opportunist) priorities of narrative film-making in China. One may even suggest that *Yellow Earth* is an "avant-gardist" attempt by young Chinese film-makers taking cover under the abstractionist ambiguities of classical Chinese painting.[10]

To film-makers and scholars, then, *Yellow Earth* raises some intriguing questions: What is the relationship between the aesthetic practice and the political discourse of this film? In what way is the text different from and incommensurable with the master narratives (socialist dogma, mainstream film-making, classical editing style, etc.), in what way is it "already written" (by patriarchy, especially) as an ideological production of that culture and society, and finally, how does this non-western text elude the logocentric character of western textual analysis as well as the sweeping historicism of cultural criticism?[11]

This essay will address the above questions by opening up the text of *Yellow Earth* (as many modernist texts have been pried open) with sets of contemporary western methods of close reading—cine-structuralist, Barthesian post-

structuralist, neo-Marxian culturalist, and feminist discursive. This will place *Yellow Earth* among the many parsimoniously plural texts and satisfy the relentless decipherers of signifieds and their curiosity for an oriental text. The following discussion of this text will show that the movement of the narrative and text of *Yellow Earth* involves the interweaving and work of four structurally balanced strands (micro-narratives) on three levels: a diegetic level (for the construction of and inquiry about cultural and historical meaning), a critical level (for the disowning and fragmentation of the socialist discourses), and a discursive level (for the polyvocal articulations of and about Chinese aesthetics and feudalist patriarchy).[12] In this way, I hope to identify certain premises of Chinese cosmological thinking and philosophy as related in and through this text. In this analytic process, the contextual reading of Chinese culture and political history will show, however, the limitations of textual analysis and hence its critique.[13]

I shall begin with a brief description of the organization of the four narrative strands and their function on both diegetic and critical levels. The Lévi-Straussian structural analysis of myths is initially useful: the peasant father imposes feudal rules on Cui Ciao, the daughter (he marries her off to stabilize the kinship system) and the soldier imposes public officers' rules on her as well (he prevents her from joining the army before securing official approval). Thus, even though the host-guest relationship of the peasant and the soldier mobilizes other pairs of antinomies such as agriculture/warfare, subsistence/revolution, backwardness/modernization, the pattern of binaries breaks down when it comes to religion/politics, since both signify, in Chinese thinking, patriarchal power as a guardian figure. In addition, Han Han, the young male heir in the film, counteracts the establishment (runs in the reverse direction of the praying patriarchs) in the same way Cui Ciao does (rows the boat against the Yellow River currents for her own liberation). Again, the antinomy peasant/soldier is destabilized, as myth is often disassembled in history—that is, the mythic glory of hierarchic dynasties and the revolutionary success of urban militia breaks down when confronted by the historical sensibility of the post-Cultural Revolution period.

There are four terms of description: brother, sister, father, soldier. While there is a relationship of consanguinity and descent, both are complicated by the problematic relation of affinity: Cui Ciao's intimacy with Han Han and their distance from the peasant father is more excessive while romance is taboo and marriage is ritual in the film. The prohibition of incest among family members (Cui Ciao with her brother or father) is transferred to prohibition of romantic involvement between Cui Ciao and the soldier, enforced at the cost of the girl's life.[14] Hence, the textual alignment of patriarchy with sexual repression. However, the film text is not to be confused with an anthropological account. As both Fredric Jameson and Brian Henderson point out, historicism is at work in the complex mode of sign production and in reading.[15] Hence this text would preferably be read with a historical knowledge of the Communist Party's courtship with the peasants and its reconstruction of man [sic] through the construction of socialist manhood—which reserves desire for the perfection of the ideological and economic revolution, while the liberation of women (its success a much-debated topic) becomes an apparatus for the Party's repression of male sexuality, besides being a means for winning a good reputation. Hence the position of contemporary Chinese women, generally speaking, involves a negotiation between patriarchy and socialist feminism in ways more complicated than what one deduces from the Lévi-Straussian analysis of kinship systems.

Now I shall proceed to a more detailed (though non-exhaustive) discussion of what is at work in each of the micro-narratives as nar-

Cui Ciao and Gu Qing: YELLOW EARTH

rative strands, as well as the contextual readings relevant to the textual strategies.

First Narrative Strand: the Peasant's Story

The scenes assembled for the first narrative strand have a strong ethnographic nature: the material relation between the Shaanbei peasants and their land is documented through the repetitive activities of ploughing land on bare slopes, getting water every day from the Yellow River ten miles away, tending sheep, cooking, and quiet residence inside the cave home, while marriages and rain prayers are treated with a moderate amount of exotic interest—of the urban Han people looking at their rural counterparts. The peasants are depicted as people of spare words (Cui Ciao's father even sings little: "What to sing about when [one is] neither happy nor sad?"). They have a practical philosophy (their aphorism: "friends of wine and meat, spouse of rice and flour") and they show a paternal benevolence (Cui Ciao's father only sings for the soldier for fear that the latter may lose a job if not enough folk tunes were collected). Obviously, anthropological details have been pretty well attended to.

Meaning is assigned according to a historical or even ontological dependence of peasants on their motherly Land and River. This signifying structure is first of all spatially articulated: the Loess landscape with its fascinating ancient face is a silent but major figure both in Chinese painting and in this film. Consistent with the "high and distant" perspective in scroll painting is the decentered framing with the spatial contemplation of miniaturized peasants as black dots laboring to cross the vast spans of warm yellow land to get to the river or their cave homes.[16] No collective farming appears in this film, and neither planting nor harvesting modify this relationship. The symbolic representation of an ancient agrarian sensibility is condensed in shots that include the bare details of one man, one cow, and one tree within the frame in which the horizon is always set at the upper level and the land, impressive with deep ravines, appears almost flattened. In an inconspicuous way, the Yellow River's meaning is also contemplated: the peasants are nourished by it and are sometimes destroyed by it. A narrative function is attached: this is a place in dire need of reform, and it is also stubbornly resistant. The state of this land and people accounts for the delay of enlightenment or modernity—there is an unquestioning reliance on metaphysical meaning, be it the Old Master of Heavens or the Dragon King of the Sea, but which is tied so closely to the survival of the village. The narrative refusal of and enthusiasm for revolution are motivated: the ideology of survival is a much stronger instinct than the passion for ideals. But to the peasants, the Party could have been one of the rain gods.

There is a vocal part to this cosmological expression as well, articulated dialectically for a critical purpose. We shall attend to three voices: the first, that of the peasant's respect for the land: "This old yellow earth, it lets you step on it with one foot and then another, turn it over with one plough after another. Can you take that like it does? Shouldn't you respect it?" A classical form of deification borne from a genuine, everyday relationship. Then it is countered by the second, the soldier's voice: "We collect folk songs—to spread out—to let the public know what we suffering people are sacrificing for, why *we farmers* [my emphasis] need a revolution." Gu Qing offers a rational reading of the agrarian beliefs; his statement contains a simple dialectic—the good earth brings only poverty, and the way out is revolution. Yet his statement and his belief is but a modernized form of deification: the revolution and its ultimate signified (the Revolutionary Leader) are offered to replace the mythic beliefs through a (false) identification by the soldier with the peasants ("Our Chairman likes folk songs," says the soldier). Blind loyalty (of peasants to land) finds homology in, and is renarrativized by, a rational discourse (of soldier to his Leader). The ancient structure of power changes hand here; thereafter, the feudalist circulation of women and socialist liberation of women will also remain homological.

As explicit contradiction between the first two voices remains unresolved, a major clash breaks out in the form of a third voice, which appears in the rain prayer sequence. Assembled in their desiccated land, the hungry peasants chant in one voice: "Dragon King of the Sea, Saves Tens of Thousands of People, Breezes and Drizzles, Saves Tens of Thousands of People." Desperation capsuled: the hungry bow fervently to the Heavens, then to their land, and then to their totemic Dragon King of the Sea, in a primitive form of survival instinct. At this

The patriarchal peasantry happy to perpetuate the exchange of women: YELLOW EARTH

moment the soldier appears (his return to the village) from a distance, silent. A 180° shot/reverse shot organizes their (non)encounter: a frontal view of the approaching soldier, followed by a rear view of the peasants whose collective blindness repudiates what the soldier signifies (remember his song "the Communist Party Saves Tens of Thousands of People"). In this summary moment of the people's agony and the film's most searing questioning of the Revolution's potential, the multiple signifieds are produced in and through a mirroring structure: the soldier's failure reflected by the peasants' behavior and the peasants' failure in the soldier's presence.

At the outset, two dialectical relationships are set up explicitly in the text, one against the other: between peasant and nonpeasant, and between peasant and land. The roots of feudalism, through this first narrative strand, are traced to their economic and cultural bases, and are compared in a striking way to Chinese socialism. In this manner, the whole micro-narrative is historicized to suggest reflections on contemporary China's economic and political fiascos. But there is another relationship between the filmic space and the audience's (focal) gaze. The nonperspectival presentation of landscapes in some shots and sequences often leads one's gaze to linear movements within the frame, following the contours of the yellow earth and the occasional appearance and disappearance of human figures in depth on an empty and seemingly flat surface. The land stretches within the frame, both horizontally and vertically, with an overpowering sense of scale and yet without being menacing. In these shots and sequences, the desire of one's gaze is not answered by the classical western style of suturing, indeed it may even be frustrated.[17] Rather, this desire is dispersed in the decentered movement of the gaze (and shifts in eye level as well) at a centrifugal representation of symbolically limitless space. Such an unfocused spatial consciousness (maintained also by nonclassical editing style) has a dialectical relationship with one's pleasure-seeking consciousness. It frustrates if one looks for phallocentric (or feminist, for that matter) obsessions within an appropriatable space, and it satisfies if one lets the sense of endlessness/emptiness take care of one's desire (i.e., a passage without narrative hold). In these instances, one sees an image without becoming its captive; in other words, one is not just the product of cinematic discourse (of shot/reverse shot, in particular), but still circulates within that discourse almost as "nonsubject" (i.e., not chained tightly to signification).

Within the text of *Yellow Earth,* one may say, two kinds of pleasures are set up: a hermeneutic movement prompts the organization of cinematic discourse to hold interest, while the Taoist aesthetic contemplation releases that narrative hold from time to time. Most of the

moments are assigned meaning and absences of narrative image are filled, though some have evaded meaning in the rationalist sense. When the latter occurs, the rigorous theoretical discourses one uses for deciphering are sometimes gently eluded.

Second Narrative Strand: The Daughter's Story

In as much as the sense of social identity defines the person within Chinese society, individuals in Chinese films are often cast as non-autonomous entities within determining familial, social, and national frameworks. Ever since the 1920s, the portrayals of individuals in films have been inextricably linked to institutions and do not reach resolution outside the latter. Hence, unlike the classical Hollywood style, homogeneity is not restored through the reconciliation of female desires with the male ones, and the ways of looking are not structured according to manipulations of visual pleasure (coding the erotic, specifically) in the language of the western patriarchal order. With an integration of socialism with Confucian values, film texts after 1949 have often coded the political into both narrative development and visual structures, hence appropriating scopophilia for an asexual idealization. In the post-Cultural Revolution context, then, the critique of such a repressive practice naturally falls on the desexualizing (hence dehumanizing) discourses in the earlier years and their impact on the cultural and human psyche.[18]

The plotting of *Yellow Earth,* following the doomed fate of Cui Ciao the daughter, seems to have integrated the above view of social identity with the recent critique of dehumanizing political discourses. Within the second narrative strand, the exchange of women in paternally arranged marriages is chosen as the signifier of feudalist victimization of women, while the usual clichés of cruel fathers or class villains are replaced by kind paternal figures. The iconic use of feudal marriage ceremonies has become common literary and filmic practice since the 1930s, but compared with other texts, this one is more subtle and complex in its enunciation of sympathy for women.[19] In this regard, we may undertake to identify two sets of homological structures in the text that function for the above purpose. It is through the narrative and cinematic construction of these structures that *Yellow Earth* made its statement on patriarchal power as manifested in cultural, social, and political practices.

The first set of homological structures involves the spatial construction of two marriage processions, each characterized by a montage in close-up of the advancing components (trumpet players, donkey, dowry, the red palanquin and its carriers) in more or less frontal views. In each case, the repetitive and excessive appearance of red, which culturally denotes happiness, fortune, and spontaneity is reversed in its connotative meaning within the dramatic context of the oppressive marriages. More significantly, the absence/presence of Cui Ciao as an intradiegetic spectator and her look become a linchpin to that system of signification. In the first marriage sequence, the bride is led from the palanquin to kneel with the groom before the ancestor's plate and then taken to their bedroom. Meanwhile, Cui Ciao as a spectator is referred to three or four times in separate shots, establishing her looking as a significant reading of the movement of the narrative. Yet she is not detached from that narrative at all. Seeing her framed as standing at the doorway where Confucius's code of behavior for women is written, one is constantly reminded that Cui Ciao's inscription will be similarly completed (through marriage) within the Confucian code.[20] Her look identifies her with the scene of marriage, and also relays to the audience her narrative image as a young rural female. The victimizing structure (feudalist patriarchy) and the potential victim (Cui Ciao) are joined through a shot/reverse-shot method, mobilized by her looking which coded the social and the cultural into the signifying system here.

In the second marriage sequence, the similar

YELLOW EARTH: *The bridal palanquin*

analysis in close-up of the advancing procession (by a similar editing style) performs an act of recall, which as a transformed version of the first marriage sequence reminds the audience of Cui Ciao's role as the intradiegetic spectator previously. In this instance, however, Cui Ciao is the bride, locked behind the dull black door of the palanquin covered by a dazzlingly red cloth. The big close-up of the palanquin, however, suggests her presence within the shot (hidden), in depth, and going through the process of "fulfilling" the inscription predicted earlier on for her against her wish for freedom. The palanquin replaces her look but points to her absence/presence. At the same time, Han Han, her quiet brother, replaces Cui Ciao as an intradiegetic spectator looking (almost at us) from the back of the palanquin, figuring her absence and her silence. Han Han as the brother represents an ideal form of male sympathy in that context, yet as the son and heir of a feudal system, he is also potentially responsible for the perpetuation of this victimization. In this manner, the text shifts from a possible statement on class (backwardness of peasants before the Liberation) to a statement of culture (the closed system of patriarchy) to locate the woman's tragedy. With an intertextual understanding of most post-1949 Chinese films presenting feudal marriages, this cultural statement becomes a subtle comment on the (prorevolutionary) textual appropriations of folk rituals for political rhetorics.

The second set of homological structures appears in two pairs of narrative relationships between three characters (between Cui Ciao's father and Cui Ciao, and between Gu Qing the soldier and Cui Ciao) concerning the subject of women's (and Cui Ciao's) fate. Initially, one finds the first relationship a negative one while the second is positive, i.e., the father being feudal but the soldier liberating. This is encapsulated in a dialogue in which the soldier attempts to convince the peasants that women in socialist-administered regions receive education and choose their own husbands, and Cui Ciao's father answers: "How can that be? We farmers have rules." However, when one compares the peasants' exchange of women for the survival of the village and the revolutionaries' liberation of women for the promotion of the cause, then one finds both relationships being similarly fixated on woman as the Other in their production of meaning. Such a homology, nevertheless, is assymetrical in presentation. On the one hand, the film is direct about the negative implications of the patrilinear family though without falling into a simple feminist logic (Cui Ciao's father sympathizes with women's tragedy in the sour tune he sings for the soldier). On the other, there is no questioning about the socialist recruitment of women (and Cui Ciao's failure to join the army is regarded as regrettable). The critique falls on another issue: Gu Qing's refusal to take Cui Ciao along with him because "We public officers have rules, we have to get the leader's approval." Thus it is nongendered bureaucracy that is at stake here, and not exactly the patriarchal aspects of the feudalist and socialist structures, which can only be identified from an extratextual position.

The suspected drowning of Cui Ciao, then, can be read as the textual negotiation with the symbolic loss of meaning: she is to be punished (by patriarchy, of course) for overturning the peasants' rule (by leaving her marriage), for brushing aside the public officers' rule (by leaving to join the army without permission), and for challenging nature's rule (by crossing the Yellow River when the currents are at their strongest).

When Cui Ciao is alive, the sour tunes she sings fill the film's sound track—musical signifiers narrating the sadness and the beauty of "yin." Her death, though tragic, brings into play the all-male spectacles in the text: drum-dancing and rain-prayer sequences each celebrating the strength and attraction of "yang," so much suppressed when women's issues were part of the mainstream political mores.[21] Here one detects the "split interest" of the text in these instances—the nonpolitical assignment of bearers of meaning (rather than the nonsexist) prescribes a masculine rather than feminine perspective of the narrative images of man and woman. That is to say, since the position of men and women in this patriarchal culture has been rearranged for the last three decades, first according to everyone's class background, then with a paternal favoring (as bias and strategy) of women, the text's critique of socialist discourses become its own articulation of a male perspective. In this way, this text does not escape being "overdetermined" by culture and society, although in some ways by default.

Third Narrative Strand: The Eighth Route Army Soldier's Story

Since the Yenan Forum for writers in 1942, literary writing in China followed a master narrative that privileged class consciousness over individual creativity.[22] In revolutionary realism, character types (and stereotypes) were considered the most effective methods of interpellating the masses during economic or political movements. Literary and filmic discourses on the social being dictate a structure of dichotomies: proletariat/bourgeois, Party members/non-Party members, allies/enemies, peasants/landlords, etc. It was not until 1978 that "wound literature" gave an ironic bent to the hagiographic mode for Party members and cadres. Still, such writing found shelter in specificity—for example, Xie Jin's *Legend of Tien Yun Mountain* and other adaptations from wound literature were bold in questioning the political persecution of intellectuals during the terrifying decade, unmistakably attributing the causes of people's suffering to the influences of the Gang of Four. Dichotomy, however, was basically maintained even though the introduction of good cadre/bad cadre did cause some reshuffling in the antinomies. Meanwhile, the master narrative remained intact, with authority diminished but the direct questioning of it taboo.[23]

The figure of an Eighth Route Army soldier and Party member in *Yellow Earth,* therefore, was not written without technical caution and political subtleties. A number of alterations to humanize the soldier were made during adaptation which to some extent decentralized his position in the narrative. Nevertheless, the rectitude of a revolutionary perspective and its influence on the peasants were not the least mitigated—that is to say, the third narrative strand sets the three others in motion. Thus, even when the representation of the Party member may be more in line with the popular notion, that is, there is a level of operation that makes socialist interpretation plausible. One may say that with an audience used to being prompted by dialogue and behavior, the figure of Gu Qing does not contest the proper image of a revolutionary military man.

As a signifying structure, the soldier's story functions as (in)difference and as metonymy, which is where the ironic mode works. The figures of that ancient agrarian subculture are no longer the same when Gu Qing, the outsider, enters—they are transformed under the soldier's gaze of bewilderment, which subsequently exerts its critical import. It is the third strand that begins the braiding process among the four and is responsible for the climaxes: the daughter no longer submits to her father's wishes, the son abandons the rain-prayer ceremony. Yet, these changes take place virtually outside Gu Qing's knowledge: he is ignorant of Cui Ciao's dilemma (except about women's fate in a general way) and of the peasants' problem of survival (except in broad terms of their poverty). The Party's political courtship with the peasants is metonymically dealt with here, in the prohibition of romance (as lack of knowledge) between Gu Qing and Cui Ciao, and also powerfully in the last scene of rain prayer which brought into circulation "hunger" as the peasants' signified (versus the power elite's lack of experience of it) for their rural human-land and marriage relationships. Tension between history and ideology was again condensed, the three to four decades' national history of socialism contesting to little avail the five thousand years' national ideology of subsistence. The peasants' hospitable reception of Gu Qing and Cui Ciao's idealist trust in the Party further reinforce the ironic mode—difference is not a simple dichotomy and often works in the areas least expected. Then, none could go very far: Cui Ciao disappears in the Yellow River, the peasants are dying of drought, while the totemic figure of the Sea Dragon King dominates the scene, lifted by worshippers who want their lives saved. The discourse here is historicist: the cultural and epistemological barriers (of both Party and people) to the capitalist market economy in the 1980s motivates this myth of survival. Yet, it is also historical: the gods, emperors, leaders, all have been sought after by people in disaster, and made disasters by people.

The Fourth Strand: Han Han's Story

A quiet young boy with a blank facial expression, Han Han moves almost inconspicuously as a curious figure in the scenes. One may even ponder a Brechtian address made possible by this marginal but conscious presence. Almost uninscribed by culture, and, to some extent, by the text itself, Han Han has the greatest degree of differentiation (i.e., Han Han = X) and

exists to be taken up by the three other narrative strands for signification.[24]

As a peasant's son, Han Han is heir to land, feudalism, and patriarchy. As a brother to Cui Ciao, he is the displaced site of her repressed feminine love and its failure. As a little pal of Gu Qing's he is the first person to learn the song and spirit of revolution. Yet his story is also underdeveloped. In other words, Han Han is neither unconnected nor fixated in the textual generation of meaning. Contrary to the marked positions of other song singers (of either sour tunes or revolutionary songs), Han Han is more ambiguous with his short "bed wetting song" (which made unrefined jokes with both the Sea Dragon King and the son-in-law) before the soldier recruits his voice for the revolutionary song, which he sings only once. In the scene where he is already made part of the fanatic horde of worshippers, Han Han turns towards the sight of the soldier as the source of possible change in an act of individual decision.

However, it is not Han Han the literary figure that escapes inscription. Indeed, pressured by political demands, the textual movement of Han Han is along the trajectory of "liberation," though there is no intention of completing it. The circulation of Han Han (as X) along the various narrative strands is, significantly, a production of textual interweaving. When conventional meaning in that society has been fragmented and questioned within the text, Han Han (as a textual figure) functions as the desire for meaning. One may venture to say Han Han is the signifier of that meaning—an insight for history and culture with an urge for change, portrayed as a childish moment before inscription, before meaning is fixed at the level of the political and agrarian institutions. Therefore the silent, blank face, because to speak, to have a facial expression, is to signify, to politicize.

A braid? Perhaps, as one woven by culture in society, and not flaunted as a fetish. Since the nineteenth century, major historical events in China (wars, national calamities, revolutions, etc.) have made four topics crucial to national consciousness: feudalism, subsistence, socialism, and modernization, and discourses are prompted in relation to them in numerous literary and cultural texts. In 1984, when contemporary China struggles with the evil spells of the Cultural Revolution and begins flirting once again with the capitalist market economy, discourses related to the four topics reappear in terms of current issues: will the agrarian mentality of its people prevent China from becoming a modern nation? Will feudal relations persist in spite of the lure of individualist entrepreneurship? Will the country's recent radical economic move (as in the Great Leap Forward) bring another large-scale fiasco? Is the Communist party leadership still competent for the changing 1980s? Will a second Cultural Revolution occur soon? As technology and business turn corporate and global, the answers to these questions can no longer be found in an isolated situation. The China that partakes in the world's market economy no longer operates in an "ideological context" that is uniquely Chinese (as it had during the Cultural Revolution). Inevitably (and maybe unfortunately), this changing, modernizing "ideological context" in China also informs the "avant-gardist" project of *Yellow Earth* which has focused its criticism only on the patriarchal and feudal ideologies of that culture. Arguably, then, *Yellow Earth*'s modernist power of critique of Chinese culture and history comes from its subtextual, noncritical proposition of capitalist-democracy as an alternative; it is (also arguably) this grain in the text that attracts the global-intellectual as well.

Han Han and Gu Qing: YELLOW EARTH

An historicist reading of texts and contexts is a powerful analytic practice. In the case of *Yellow Earth,* such a reading enables one to relate the film's textual strategies to the specific political and cultural context, while at the same time exposing some of the text's symptoms. However, there still remains a need to locate *Yellow Earth*'s difference from other interest-

Peasant drum-dancing in YELLOW EARTH

ing Chinese films made during the same period. Wu Tianming's *Life* (1984), for example, deals with the disparity between intellectual and agrarian life as an important subcultural dichotomy in Chinese identity and boldly pits individual motivation against class issues. Again, such a film is possible in China only in the 1980s. Yet, one may argue that discursive constraints are not fully watertight in their operations. With respect to *Yellow Earth,* there is a presence of a certain "negative dialectics" that seems to run counter to its grain of modernist activities and does not yield to an historicist reading. It is, again, the simple Taoist philosophy which (dis)empowers the text by (non)affirming speaking and looking: "Silent is the Roaring Sound, Formless is the Image Grand." There are many such instances in the film: when the human voice is absent and nobody looks, history and culture are present in these moments of power(lessness) of the text. With this philosophy, perhaps, we may be able to contemplate the power(lessness) of our reading of the text.

NOTES

1. For detailed discussions of the conflicts and contradictions involved in recent political and economic formulations of Chinese socialism, see Bill Brugger, ed. *Chinese Marxism in Flux, 1978–84, Essays on Epistemology, Ideology and Political Economy.* New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1985.

2. In 1985, *Yellow Earth* won five festival prizes—in China, Hawaii, Nantes, Spain and Locarno. This film's impact on filmmakers and critics in China and Hong Kong was documented in *Talking About Huang Tudi,* Chen Kaiyen, ed. Beijing: China Film Press, 1986. For an English discussion, refer to Tony Rayns's discussion of the dissident "Fifth Generation" of young PRC directors, and also his review of *Yellow Earth* in the BFI *Monthly Film Bulletin,* 10/1986.

3. A number of melodramatic and political clichés in the original essay *Echoes of the Deep Ravine* were dropped in Chen Kaige's adaptation into the screenplay titled *Silent Is the Ancient Plain.* The impressive color tones of the first work print inspired the film's final title *Yellow Earth.*

4. According to director Chen Kaige, Cui Ciao's father in the film is close to a *vérité* version of a local peasant he met during the walking reconnaissance of Shaanzi Province, and the bachelor singer in the first marriage sequence was also a local recruit. Yet, according to official views, the film's representation of peasants was ethnocentric and derogatory. One may understand this disparity by noting that Chinese socialism has always favored a more progressive image of peasants.

5. "Xintinyou," the folk songs sung in the northern Shaanxi region, provide a rich form for metaphoric expressions and direct telling of the singers' sentiments.

6. The first film completed by a group of Beijing Film Academy '82 graduates, *One and Eight (Yige He Bage,* 1984) was directed by Zhang Jun Zhao. Cinematographer Chang Imou's contribution was already regarded as the major reason for the film's aesthetic excellence. However, the film's entire ending was altered due to censorship and it was still banned from circulation. *Yellow Earth* also has several censorship problems but with its ambiguities it has better luck with the Film Bureau.

7. Examples from Xie Jin's most popular films include *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) in which a serf girl reacted positively to a soldier's influence and turned herself into a brave red soldier, and *Legend of the Tienyun Mountain* (1978) in which two women were emotionally entangled with a persecuted rightist intellectual. Xie Jin has successfully dealt with topical issues in melodramatic form shot with classical style which made most of his works tear-jerking successes in China.

8. According to Tony Rayns, the triumph of *Yellow Earth* in film festivals prompted the official accusation of its bad influence on local aspirations to "compete with the ideology of the bourgeoisie at foreign film festivals." On the other hand, it is the film's international reputation that silenced established film-makers and officials.

9. Originally from Lao Tzu's *Dao De Jing.* This Taoist concept of

representation was developed in two seminal discussions on Chinese aesthetics, "On the Origins and Bases of Chinese and Western Painting Techniques" (written in 1936), and "The Spatial Consciousness expressed in Chinese Painting and Poetry" (written in 1949) by Zhong Baihua and collected in Zhong's *A Stroll in Aesthetics,* Shanghai: The People's Press, 1981, pp. 80–113.

10. Some of the principles of Chinese spatial representation had been taken up by the west for interrogation of its own norms, e.g., Beijing Opera by Brechtian theater, and hence what is classical for one cultural system can be appropriated for avant-gardist reasons in another. Here, I would quickly add (with reference to Edward Said's discussion on "Traveling Theory" in *The World, the Text and the Critic*) that while critical consciousness is the issue, classical Chinese painting as the borrowed theory itself is not free of institutional limitations in the local context. On the other hand, the aestheticization of nature in *Yellow Earth* could also be quickly seized by western audiences for sentimentalized retreats to a pre-industrial corner of the world.

11. Culturalist or neo-Marxist criticisms of mass culture focus mostly on sign systems produced within bourgeois capitalism. In general, hardcore propaganda is taken to be characteristic of socialist sign systems, which is a gross simplification of the complicated mediations and processes at work in those economies and cultures. With reference to China, a more complicated view of socialist mass cultures is called for, and Bill Brugger's *Chinese Marxism in Flux* can be read along with Victor F. S. Sit, ed. *Commercial Laws and Business Regulations of the PRC, 1949–1983* (London: Macmillan, 1983) to see that utilitarian individualism, for example, is functional within recent Chinese economic discourses.

12. For substantial discussions of the interweaving of Confucianism, socialism and patriarchy in contemporary China, see Richard Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) and Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

13. Refer to Said's discussion of Derrida's and Foucault's approach to texts in "Criticism Between Culture and System," *The World, the Text and the Critic,* pp. 183–225.

14. The largely asexual representation of revolutionary characters was a major practice in the Revolutionary Model Plays, the only films made during 1970–73. In the post-Cultural Revolution era, the hagiographic mode of representation was debated as suppression of "true human character" in literary and film circles.

15. Both Brian Henderson's "*The Searchers:* An American Dilemma" (Bill Nichols, ed. *Movies and Methods* Vol. II, p. 429–49) and Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) have informed the historicist reading of this essay. I am also thankful to Nick Browne of UCLA who introduced me to them and gave valuable advice, and to David James of Occidental College for his inspiring comments.

16. The term "Chinese westerns" was used recently in China to describe films that took to northwestern China for location shooting (e.g., Tin Zhuangzhuang's *On the Hunting Ground,* 1984). Yet, while the American frontier appealed to the immigrants' evolutionist expansion of social and political organization over inanimate nature (according to Frederick J. Turner), the Chinese west evoked a non-aggressive self-reflection: or according to Wang Wei, "The sage, harboring the Tao, responds to eternal objects; the wise man, purifying his emotions, savors the images of things."

17. While I agree with Heath's critique of Oudart-Dayan's definition of "suturing" in filmic discourse as "narrow," I still refer here, for the sake of convenience, to the privileged example of shot/reverse-shot as the suturing approach to spatial articulation.

18. In this respect, Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" would not be relevant to many Chinese films, and especially not to those made during the Cultural Revolution which prohibited erotic codes in its representation of women.

19. One may suggest, in terms of Teresa DeLauretis's "Desire in Narrative" in *Alice Doesn't* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 139–46), that there are instances in which the girl in *Yellow Earth* moves as "mythical subject" in narrative while men became her topoi; the marriage sequence and the river-crossing sequence are arguable examples.

20. The four Chinese characters in the shot are "San Cong Si Dè," meaning "three obediences and four virtues." The "three obediences" for a Chinese woman are obedience to her father at home, to her husband after marriage, and to her son in her widowhood.

21. "Yin," the female element; "Yang," the male element. These two elements in Chinese cosmology involve symbolic systems and economies present both in the male and the female gender.

22. "Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art," *Mao Zedong on Literature and Art,* Beijing Foreign Language Press, 1977.

23. Recently, the citing of Mao's "Talks at the Yanan Forum" as the standard of literary and artistic creation in China is usually indicative of a tightened literary policy. In 1987, with the "anti-bourgeois liberalization" movement, China celebrated the 45th anniversary of the "Talks."

24. This concept is taken from Gilles Deleuze's "À Quoi Reconnaît-on le Structuralisme?" (1973). Han Han's name in Chinese means simple and lacking the ability to talk well.

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SCOTT MacDONALD

Su Friedrich: Reappropriations

It's not unusual these days for those who have followed the history of North American avant-garde film to complain that the great days of "The Movement" are over, that important avant-garde film-makers are no longer coming onto the cinema scene. While this attitude is definitely not one I share, I notice that even those who announce such views make certain exceptions. Perhaps the most frequent of these is Su Friedrich.[1] Su Friedrich has earned the respect of those who have lost patience for avant-garde cinema, despite the fact that she's made relatively few films: *Hot Water,* 1978; *Scar Tissue,* 1979; *Cool Hands Warm Heart,* 1979; *I Suggest Mine,* 1980; *Gently Down the Stream,* 1981; *But No One,* 1982; *The Ties That Bind,* 1984; and *Damned If You Don't,* 1987. Her acceptance may seem strange until one sees *Gently Down the Stream, The Ties That Bind,* and *Damned If You Don't.* These three films reveal a combination of formal inventiveness and moral courage which has characterized most of the avant-garde film-makers who have been considered major figures.[2]

Gently Down the Stream combines extensive hand-scratched texts and photographed imagery. In a program note for the film, Friedrich explains that the texts are "a succession of fourteen dreams taken from eight years of my journals. They were shuffled out of their original chronological order for the purpose of coherence and because often we know/dream something long after, or before, we can use it in our lives. . . . I chose to work with dreams that were the most troubling to me, that expressed my deepest fears, anxieties and longings, or ones that had forced a sudden awareness about a nagging problem." The photographic background for the textual revelation of the dreams (the background into which they're scratched) includes several kinds of imagery: at first, shots of figures of the Virgin and Christ (and what appear to be a nun and a schoolgirl); then shots of a woman rowing on a rowing machine, apparently in a gym (this looks like found footage, though Friedrich shot it herself); then of a different woman entering and swimming in an indoor pool (this, too, looks like imagery from another era); and finally, shots of a body of water, apparently filmed from a ferry boat. Both the scratched texts and the photographic imagery are presented in a variety of ways. The textual words are scratched one or two words at a time (late in the film "blindness" is spelled letter by letter); and while some include the fluttery movement which is the usual sign of direct scratching into the emulsion, others are rephotographed so that although obviously scratched, they are motionless—sometimes caught in a blur. Generally, the size of the words and the use of capitals or lower-case letters provide emphasis, sometimes subtly, at other times dramatically: for example, after the passage, "I/wake/her, she/is/angry, smears/spermicidal/jelly/on/my/lips," the word "no" suddenly grows from small to large, back to small. (I've used slashes to remind the reader of the impact of Friedrich's one-word-at-a-time method on the experience of "reading" *Gently Down the Stream.)*[3] The photographed imagery is sometimes presented full-frame, and at other times appears within a frame-within-the-frame, on the upper right, or in the middle (and is punctuated intermittently by moments when the frame-within-the-frame image is clear white). Near the end, white circles made by punching holes in the film provide another kind of punctuation. At times the film looks flat, dead; at others the eye feels a brief barrage of flicker.

In her program notes, Friedrich indicates that she is "more concerned with finding ways to integrate the (harsh) wisdom of dreams into my life than I am in analyzing the structure and function of dreams through any given system (Freudian, Jungian, etc.)." But for the viewer there is a fascination in trying to understand the nature of the psychic disturbance dramatized by Friedrich's dreams. One fundamental aspect of the disturbance seems apparent when one connects the imagery of Catholic icons (Friedrich

GENTLY DOWN THE STREAM

was raised Catholic) with several texts which are presumably dream-distortions of particular sexual feelings or experiences: "A/woman/sits/on/a/stage, hunched/over, in/the/corner. She/calls/up/a/friend/from/the/audience. Asking/her. Come/and/make/love/to/me. She/does. I/can't/watch. ROAR/HOWL. She/mutters. I/CAN'T, can't/hold/you. The/last/time/was/too/tense. So/many/memories": "I/draw/a/man, take/his/skin, inflate/it, get/excited, mount/it. IT'S/LIKE/BEING/IN/LOVE/WITH/A/STRAIGHT/WOMAN." An internal conflict between Catholicism and lesbianism seems obvious, and is extended by dream material which deals with reproduction: "I/lie/in/a/gutter/giving/birth/to/myself, two/fetuses, dark/green/and/knotted/up. Try/to/breathe/so/they/don't/suffocate. I/can/pull/one/out, but/it/starts/to/crumble/up."

The disconcerting impact of *Gently Down the Stream* has a good deal to do with the way in which Friedrich uses text. Because we must participate in the one-word-at-a-time process of constructing the sentences that convey her dreams, we are pulled along by the current of Friedrich's psychic flow; and because we "shoot" the imagery suggested by the texts, we find ourselves, in a strange way, inside the film-maker's psyche. Friedrich effectively reverses the conventional balance of text and image, and by doing so, is able to use the photographed imagery (most of which seems to offer little more than a series of metaphors for our voyage down the film-maker's stream of consciousness) as the context for the textual significations of deeper psychic experiences.[4]

In *The Ties That Bind* (1984), Friedrich explores the historical context of her relationship with her mother, Lore Bucher, an anti-Nazi German who came of age along with the Third Reich, and at the end of World War II, came to the US with her GI husband—they met when he was working for the de-Nazification program—ultimately to raise their three children as a divorced, custodial parent. (A text at the beginning of *The Ties That Bind* introduces Friedrich's mother with her maiden name. For the sake of clarity, and since the majority of the film deals with her life before marriage, I've used Lore Bucher, rather than Lore Friedrich, throughout this discussion.) The central narrative thread of *The Ties That Bind* is a series of responses by Lore Bucher to questions. She examines her life, beginning at that moment of her childhood when she first heard about the Nazis.

The basic situation of the daughter/film-maker talking with her mother about their shared background is reminiscent of a group of films made during the early to mid-1970s—Martha Coolidge's *David: Off and On* (1973), Claudia Weill's *Joyce at 34* (1973), Amalie Rothschild's *Nana, Mom and Me* (1974), Ed Pincus's *Diaries* (1976)—in which the domestic life of the film-maker (and the effects of the camera's intrusion into this environment for a purpose other than mythifying it in conventional home movies) is the object of investigation. We see Bucher in her Chicago apartment, going for her regular swim in Lake Michigan, working in an office. And on the sound track, we hear her reminiscences and her attempts to deal with Her-Daughter-the-Film-maker: at one point she complains, "Susi, you should not do that! That's terrible," when Friedrich tape records her awkward piano playing.

Friedrich's questions of her mother are

scratched directly into the film, one word at a time (the film is silent when the scratch words are shown).[5] One result is that our construction of the questions tends to make them seem as much ours as hers, especially since they concern issues most of us have wondered about: "Didn't anyone try to sabotage the Nazis' orders?"; "So you did know about the camps?" (I have not used slashes to divide the scratched words in *The Ties That Bind* because Friedrich's timing in the later film allows for a smoother, less syncopated reading/viewing experience.)

Much of what Lore Bucher reveals is fascinating. We are reminded of the many ways in which Nazism worked itself into the everyday lives of Germans and of the struggles of German families not in synch with the developing Third Reich. Whether one takes Bucher's stories at face value or not, a sense of this period seen from the inside comes across. Nearly as interesting as Bucher's memories of the rise of Nazis are her comments on the arrival of the Allies at the end of the war.

The majority of what we *see* in the film does not document or dramatize what Bucher says (her comments are the only audio element Friedrich uses); rather, it provides a range of contextualizations. The visual imagery takes two forms: hand-scratched texts and photographed imagery of a variety of kinds. In addition to her scratched questions, Friedrich uses text to provide emphasis and add new information. In general, the texts have an unusual power. Because they are scratched, they give the film a handcrafted, personal feel (an effect familiar from the history of filmic uses of scratches as imagery: Brakhage's titles and "by Brakhage," for example, and Len Lye's *Free Radicals,* Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* and *Plumb Line,* Diana Barrie's *Letters from China* and *Magic Explained*). And because of Friedrich's one-word-at-a-time presentation, and her skillful timing, they have considerable graphic and narrative power.

As is true in *Gently Down the Stream,* the photographed imagery in *The Ties That Bind* is not, at least at first, the primary focus of the viewer's experience: one's attention is on Lore Bucher's vocal reminiscences and Friedrich's scratched texts. But the more one sees the film, the more the intricate network of subtle relationships between the sound track and the photographed imagery declares itself.

The photographic visuals of *The Ties That Bind* include a wide range of imagery. As mentioned earlier, there is a good deal of 16mm material studying Lore Bucher and her environment in July 1982, when Friedrich was working on the film. In addition, there is the inky, loosely hand-held Super-8 footage (later enlarged to 16mm) that Friedrich collected when she travelled to Germany to visit Ulm, Dachau, and Berlin in 1982, and the 16mm material she shot when she travelled to upstate New York to attend a Seneca Army Depot antinuclear demonstration. There are several kinds of older footage as well: archival material from the war; home movies of Bucher and Paul Friedrich during the early years of their marriage; and in one instance, a shot of a "patriotic" woman prancing around waving an American flag—an Edison paper print from the Library of Congress collection. There is also footage of TV shows and ads, of a woman reading the newspaper (at a table, in the bathtub, on the toilet . . .), and of Friedrich looking through several pieces of politically oriented junk mail which warn of nuclear holocaust and of the rebirth of Nazism in the contemporary US. Finally, there is footage of Friedrich (presumably) constructing and subsequently destroying a small plastic model of a traditional German house, which is presented periodically during the first half of the film.

Despite the variety of Friedrich's imagery, the highly edited film does not create the barrage effect of dialectic montage. Rather, the various sources of visual and auditory imagery create a flow within which individual threads of information periodically intersect in suggestive ways. At the very beginning of the film, for example, as Lore Bucher tells of first learning about the Nazis when she was a child, the photographed imagery is a subjective camera shot of someone coming out of a tunnel into the light—suggesting the young Bucher's growing consciousness of the larger world and the birth of the Reich, as well as Friedrich's coming out of the darkness about her past. A moment later, just as Bucher explains how "that man" (Hitler) came just at the moment when the Germans were "looking for *some* way out of their total and utter misery" during the postwar depression, we see a desolate winter landscape followed by a murky shot of a hawk diving to

attack its prey (a shot which is repeated in two instances later in the film: just after Bucher explains how one of her teachers attacked her for passing homework answers to a Jewish friend, and when she describes the Allied tanks rolling in to "liberate" Ulm). The more one examines the particulars of the various threads of information, the richer the film becomes.

One of the more important effects of Friedrich's tactic of interweaving the various kinds of material—an effect made particularly effective by her decision to use only black-and-white footage—is to remind us that the struggles of the past and present are parts of the same overall mind-set and historical process. Soon after Bucher exclaims, "That people can live and be so brutal!" (she's talking about the Allied invasion of her town), Friedrich reveals a sign in the vicinity of the Seneca Army Depot: we can't read the sign clearly, but a directly scratched circle surrounds it, and a scratch-text explains, "The sign says 'Nuke them till they glow, then shoot them in the dark.' " We are reminded not only that the sort of people who enjoy the brutalities of war are still around, but that the technologies which have developed to make worldwide nuking possible (and the Seneca Army Depot necessary) were one of the breakthroughs of the war that brought down the Third Reich; in fact some of the technologies came here with German scientists after the Allied occupation of Europe. That the Allies were/are, as Lore Bucher explains, "no better than anybody else" insofar as their potential for brutality is concerned, is also suggested by the crowd of flag-waving, club-wielding demonstrators protesting the women's encampment at Seneca, seen just before she makes this comment.

While the continuity between the growing militarism in Germany during the 1930s and that in the United States during the 1980s may be the most obvious implication of the network of interconnections Friedrich developed during the editing of *The Ties That Bind,* the relationships she sees between growing up as a woman in Germany then and in the US now are equally and perhaps more fundamentally important to the film. Judging from the elements of Nazism focused on, Friedrich sees the Nazis' approach to the question of gender difference as crucial to their ideology (one passage describes the Nazi Cross of Honor awarded to women who stayed

THE TIES THAT BIND

out of the workforce and had many children), and the general position of women in German society as responsible for the nature of her mother's experience during and after the war. Upon graduation from high school Lore Bucher had planned and expected to go to college: "And then I was told I could study no further. The guardian who was set up after my father had died claimed that there was not enough money to continue the education. . . . All I had talked about was how I wanted to go to the university and study. And I have never forgotten the *shock* when we were told. . . . They consented to pay for secretarial school. . . ."

Ironically, soon after Bucher offends a Nazi party functionary, she is taken from her home in the middle of the night by soldiers who transport her to the airbase at Darmstadt, where her secretarial skills are put in service of the German government. Later, during the Allied occupation at the end of the war, she worked at the American military headquarters. But she never accepted the truncation of her hopes. In fact, her meeting Paul Friedrich was "like a straw. I thought, ah, now God is good after all: I couldn't do it [go to college] then, eventually I will do it," and she remembers his assuring her, "Oh don't worry about it, you will be able to do this and you will be able to do that, you can play the piano and you can go and sing." But when they don't have enough money, she returns to work to pay for his college tuition. When he divorces her in 1965, she is left with three children to raise. The film ends with the scratch-text, "In 1980 (after raising three children alone) she bought herself a piano and began to practice the scales."

That her mother's continual sacrifice has made it possible for Friedrich to have a better life is implicit in the fact of *The Ties That Bind.*

Though Lore Bucher was never able to study to become a pianist, Su Friedrich has become a film-maker. It seems only fitting that in her first long film she pays her respects to what her mother has gone through. And yet *The Ties That Bind* is full of poignant ironies. For one thing, it seems clear in Friedrich's questions that she has long wondered to what degree her mother acted in complicity with the Third Reich (at least by inaction); and the fact that she seems to be asking the relevant questions for the first time, in the film, suggests that she has grown up with suspicions of her mother and of her own Germanness. In other words, Lore Bucher's experiences have continued to have a negative effect on her life and on at least one of her children—on relationships that didn't begin until after she had moved to the US. While Friedrich's making the film suggests her coming to terms with this dimension of her heritage, and an end to her suspicions of her mother, the film itself suggests that should the increasing militarization of the US lead to the nuclear war that terrifies the Seneca Depot demonstrators, the sacrifices of Lore Bucher—and of all the other women who have supported children and husbands at the cost of their own development —will have come to nothing. *The Ties That Bind* sings Lore Bucher as a survivor, but it quivers with fear.

Friedrich's decision to explore her German background confronted an implicit cultural taboo. Like many of us who have German roots, Friedrich was (and, I'm sure, still is) haunted by the specter of the Holocaust: even if we grew up after the Holocaust ended, our genetic inheritance seems to condemn us. At the time when she talked with her mother, Friedrich could not be sure what her mother might reveal about herself—and by implication, about Friedrich. And even once she had learned of her mother's fervent disapproval of the Nazis and what this stance may have cost her, Friedrich had to have been well aware that whatever suffering her mother and the rest of her family endured was probably mild compared to what went on in the camps, and that therefore a film that tried to create sympathy for a German family could seem counterproductive. The finished film, however, is useful and revealing in a wide variety of ways, not least of which is that it allows people of German heritage to admire the courageous example of some Germans in resisting the Nazi horror, and hopefully to feel their own progressive urges reconfirmed.

Damned If You Don't, Friedrich's newest film, returns to the issue of Catholicism and lesbian sexuality. But where *Gently Down the Stream* grimly dramatizes the psychic trauma this conflict seems to have created in Friedrich, the new film is as good-humored as it is daring. *Damned If You Don't* imbeds a narrative about a young nun (played by Peggy Healey) who is pursued by a young woman (played by Ela Troyano) within an informal investigation of some of the ways in which the issue of nuns and sexuality has played itself out in Western culture.

Damned If You Don't begins as the Troyano character lights a candle and pours herself some wine in preparation for watching the Michael Powell-Emeric Pressburger film, *Black Narcissus* (1947) on TV. Her preparations suggest ritual, rather than offhand TV viewing; and this is reconfirmed during the subsequent narrative: it becomes clear that as part of her romantic pursuit of the nun, she is immersing herself in cultural lore about nuns. Later we see her reading Judith C. Brown's *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy.*

Black Narcissus is about a nun who is in charge of a convent in the Himalayas, where she and her colleagues minister to the surrounding communities. In its time, *Black Narcissus* was an important critical success (it won Academy Awards for best color photography and best art direction in color, and Deborah Kerr was judged best actress of 1947 by the New York Film Critics for her role as the good nun). In *Damned If You Don't,* however, the commercial film's implicit ideology, rather than its formal successes, are at issue. By recording passages of the film from a black-and-white TV screen, Friedrich impedes the viewer's ability to become engaged with *Black Narcissus* on its own terms (she uses the inevitable interference bands that are created when film records from TV both to distance us from *Black Narcissus* and to impart her own rhythms to *Damned If You Don't*). This distancing is confirmed by a critique of the implicit sexual politics of *Black Narcissus,* written by Friedrich and Cathy Quinlan and spoken on the sound track by Martina Siebert.

The critique amusingly reveals the male-

centered nature of even this film about nuns, where the convent (formerly a palace for a general's concubine) is located on a mountain called the "Bare Goddess," and where in every crisis the romantic Mr. Dean can be counted on to save the nuns. The précis suggests not only that the nuns' repression of their heterosexual desire is not entirely successful (one nun—a "bad nun"—offers herself to Mr. Dean and even the "good nun" is moved by him), but that the nuns are interesting primarily as sublimated lovers. The précis continues as Friedrich herself sings, "No, I won't be a nun. No, I shall not be a nun, for I am so fond of pleasure. I cannot be a nun," a line we hear sung later by the Mr. Dean character as he leaves the convent laughing.[6]

We see the young woman following the nun, who enters the church. (In the credits, Friedrich identifies the young woman as "The Other Woman," a designation which can be read either as an emphasis of the nun's womanness —the *other* woman—or as a reference to the conventional romantic triangle: here, of course, the nun is "married" to God.) The Other Woman follows the nun into the church but when the nun realizes she's being followed, she leaves. The Other Woman is then seen planting flowers in a garden near where the nun lives, while the nun takes the subway to Coney Island. As Friedrich intercuts between the two women, the sound track adds other kinds of information. Periodically during the remainder of the film, we hear a woman (Makea McDonald) reminiscing about her discomfort when the nuns in her Catholic school discussed sexual anatomy with her class, describing the crushes she had on certain nuns, discussing the apparent love relationship between two of the nuns who taught at her college, and remembering a heterosexual relationship. In other instances, we hear a different woman (Cathy Quinlan) read passages from *Immodest Acts:* specifically, the court testimony of Sister Mea Crivelli recalling her sexual experiences with Sister Benedetta during Benedetta's trial. Some of Crivelli's testimony is highly imaginative: for example, she remembers Sister Benedetta having powerful pains in the chest for eight to ten hours each night until the second day of Easter when her heart was removed by Jesus; three days later the heart was returned by Jesus. Despite the excesses of her testimony, however, Crivelli's revelations were apparently enough to send Benedetta to the convent prison for 35 years; Crivelli remained in the convent.

As the central narrative of *Damned If You Don't* develops, it becomes clear that the Other Woman is as ardent in her pursuit as the nun is frightened. After planting the flowers, she buys a design for a needlepoint image of Jesus (a similar kind of needlepoint is done by the good nun in *Black Narcissus*). Meanwhile, at Coney Island, the nun wanders around, finally entering the aquarium where she watches a pair of white whales twist and twirl together through the water. The imagery of the nun and the whales is one of the most sensuously beautiful passages I've seen in film; in fact, throughout *Damned If You Don't* (and in *Gently Down the Stream* and *The Ties That Bind,* for that matter) Friedrich handles black-and-white with remarkable dexterity and authority. Presumably the beautiful whales image the nun's growing desire for the Other Woman. When the nun returns to the convent and again sees the Other Woman, she is very disturbed. But the Other Woman persists. She sews the needlepoint of Christ and, while the nun is out, hangs it in her room.

The final section of the film—the meeting of the two women—is announced by the loud tolling of a bell on the sound track, and accompanied by shots of two tightrope walkers gracefully making their way along a high wire. Suddenly the nun is at the Other Woman's apartment. The film concludes with a long, exquisite scene of the two women making love, with the credit, and finally with a large "AMEN."

In addition to the central narrative, and the précis of *Black Narcissus, Damned If You Don't* includes a variety of visual imagery which, in some cases, enlarges the film's references to nuns and convents. During the long central section, as the film follows the activities of the nun and the Other Woman, we see many shots of nuns: singly, in pairs, in groups, outside churches, walking along the street (much of this material was filmed in Venice). We also see imagery of buildings I assume are convents, and in one instance, Friedrich explores a nuns' cemetery near Venice where photographs of dead nuns identify their tombstones. The film also includes imagery which seems to function metaphorically. At intervals following the end

of the précis of *Black Narcissus* we see imagery of a black-and-white snake moving through water in an aquarium and of a swan swimming in a pond behind a fence. On one hand, because of the formality of their coloring, the snake and the swan seem to be references to the nuns; their environments suggest the nuns' imprisoned sexuality. On the other hand, snakes and swans have traditionally been used as imagery of maleness. I assume Friedrich means for *Damned If You Don't* to reappropriate this imagery, to redirect it so that it suggests not a phallocentric power over sex, but female sexuality itself.[7]

Simply describing the various kinds of imagery included in *Damned If You Don't* does not create an effective sense of Friedrich's film. As is true in *The Ties That Bind,* Friedrich's painstaking editing creates a complex sensuous weave which continually articulates meaning. A range of suggestive intersections between various strands in the weave are developed. In some instances, these intersections are poignant and/or amusing. During the reading of Sister Critelli's testimony about Sister Benedetta's heart being taken out of her body, Friedrich presents brief shots of nuns in public. Again and again, the gestures of the nuns seem to relate to Crivelli's comments. When Crivelli recalls Benedetta saying, "I see Jesus approaching," for example, a nun looks toward the sky. (During the end credits, Friedrich includes a reminder that the nuns she filmed had no idea of the context their images would be used in, and she thanks the nuns for their unwitting participation.)

In other instances, shots which are germane to the film's central narrative take on a second level of meaning as a result of what is heard on the sound track. As the nun walks through Coney Island (escaping the stress caused by the Other Woman's pursuit, and perhaps thinking about her childhood experience), we hear Makea McDonald talking about the schizoid quality of her heterosexual experiences: as McDonald tells of her spirit leaving her body during heterosexual sex, we are watching a phallic-shaped tower; customers are inside a revolving room which travels up the tower. At the end of her reminiscences, McDonald sings the Lord's Prayer; as she hits the highest notes, the nun's face flares to white.

A less obvious, but fundamental element which unites the various strands of *Damned If You Don't* is a series of self-reflexive moments which punctuate the film. The first of these occurs at the conclusion of the précis of *Black Narcissus,* when we hear Friedrich and another woman talking (and Friedrich awkwardly singing the song from *Black Narcissus*). Another occurs when Friedrich's hand-held camera is used for a subjective shot of the Other Woman following the nun: the movement of the camera becomes so (amusingly) violent that it seems to refer directly to Friedrich, as well as to the character she's developing. Still other examples include several exchanges between Friedrich and Cathy Quinlan about the particulars of Quinlan's reading of *Immodest Acts,* and the conversations between McDonald and Friedrich about McDonald's experiences; during this interview, we are conscious of the microphone in much the way we are aware of it during Friedrich's interview with her mother in *The Ties That Bind.*

Our consciousness of the procedure of making *Damned If You Don't,* when combined with the fact that the woman *in* the film is involved with the same texts (*Black Narcissus, Immodest Acts*) as the artist *making* the film, suggests that, basically, the Other Woman represents Friedrich (or an important dimension of Friedrich). In one sense, *Damned If You Don't* is reminiscent of the tradition of psychodrama delineated by P. Adams Sitney in *Visionary Film* (New York: Oxford, 1974), where the artist's quest for Beauty or Vision is often represented by the figure of the ever-pursuing Dreamer. Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* and Brakhage's *Reflections on Black* can serve as examples. Here the Other Woman's pursuit of the nun suggests the quest of the sensual for the spiritual. Of course, as *Damned If You Don't* develops, we realize that the nun is more than a spiritual being. The film's increasing focus on the nun's turmoil over her pursuer, which leads to the final revelation of the nun's desire for the Other Woman, suggests that Friedrich's quest is for wholeness, the unity of the sensual and the spiritual. The wholeness is implicitly available to both the nun and the Other Woman (and Friedrich), but requires on both their parts a rejection of male-controlled institutions (such as the Catholic Church) which assume the repression of female desire in the service of a male-defined spiritual-

Peggy Healey and Ela Troyano: DAMNED IF YOU DON'T

ity, and of male-controlled institutions (such as the commercial cinema) in which the spectacle of female desire is marketed for the pleasure and utility of males.

Damned If You Don't is a courageous film on two different levels. Obviously, to attack nuns as an institution, even to *seem to* attack nuns, is highly unusual; and to do so with humor and in the name of an open expression of lesbian desire will be downright shocking for many viewers. The love-making scene where the Troyano character undresses the nun is as outrageous as it is sensual. And yet, within avant-garde film circles, within academe, within mainstream art contexts this level of Friedrich's courage will be understood and respected. (When *Damned If You Don't* was shown at the Flaherty Film Seminar this past summer, it was enthusiastically received.)

The second level of Friedrich's courage is her rejection of what has often been seen as one of the central tenets of feminist film-making since the mid-1970s. Once the filmic gaze was recognized as essentially (or at least traditionally) male, some film-makers and critics came to see traditional film pleasure as a problem, as implicit acceptance of the workings of patriarchy. Exploitative representations of the female body and female sexuality in the commercial cinema (and in the avant-garde cinema) were critiqued. It seemed necessary to expunge female nudity from serious cinema in the service of progressive feminism. Other forms of film pleasures also seemed questionable: the sensuous rhythms, textures, and structures of personal and structural forms of avant-garde film seemed too suspiciously self-indulgent (and in some cases, even phallocentric) to be sexually progressive.

Some film-makers refused to take such concerns seriously and continued to make films to be enjoyed, regardless of the implicit gender politics. Other, feminist film-makers were (or seemed to be) exploring ways of eliminating or interrupting all forms of film pleasure which could be thought to reconfirm the patriarchal tradition of film history, regardless of the cost of this tactic on the resulting film's effectiveness as entertainment.[8]

I would guess that while Friedrich may have originally been in sympathy with the second position (*Cool Hands Warm Heart* and *Scar Tissue* suggest she was), she has come to feel it a dead end, an attitude which implicitly re-establishes male primacy. If male films are sensual and pleasurable, while female (or at least "feminist")films are rigorously unsensual and pleasureless, males are defined, once again, as having something females lack. Traditionally, women have been "damned" to function as cogs in an exploitative male cinema which thrives on female sensuality. In some feminist films, women are "damned" a second time, to wander through ideologically pure but pleasureless (or, at least, sexless) narratives.

Damned If You Don't is Friedrich's declaration of independence from this pattern. The

new film energizes feminist deconstruction by locating it within a context of at least two forms of (redirected) film pleasure: the excitement of melodramatic narrative and the sensuous enjoyment of cinematic texture, rhythm, and structure. Friedrich's decision not only to include a representation of female sexuality, but to use it as the triumphant conclusion of the film is central to her new direction. Friedrich has cinematically reappropriated the pleasure *of* women *for* women. Yet she is willing to share this pleasure with men (her use of a male and female tightrope walker to announce the love-making suggests that the sexual pleasure of women need not be confined to women): if men are fortunate enough to be able to take pleasure in the pleasure of women, so be it! Regardless of what men or women do, however, Friedrich can *not* be a nun, Catholic or filmic.

NOTES

(Su Friedrich's films are distributed by Women Make Movies, 225 Lafayette St., Rm. 211, New York, NY 10012; tel. (212) 925-0606.

1. See, for example, Fred Camper, "The End of Avant-Garde Film," *Millennium Film Journal,* No. 16-18 (1986), pp. 122-123.

2. *Scar Tissue* is a silent, 6-minute collage of male and female gestures, recorded on 42nd Street; *Cool Hands Warm Heart* follows a woman's interactions with three performers on Orchard Street, each of whom performs in public a conventional female ritual normally performed in private (e.g., one shaves her armpits). *But No One* uses hand-scratched texts and flat photographed imagery to reveal Friedrich's dreams; it appears to have been made on energy left over from *Gently Down the Stream.* I have not seen the 12-minute Super-8 film *Hot Water,* or *I Suggest Mine.*

3. The complete text of *Gently Down the Stream* was published in *Heresies,* No. 16 (1983), pp. 42-45. Friedrich has been a member of the *Heresies* editorial collective.

4. In 1982 Friedrich designed and had printed a book which contains the complete text of *Gently Down the Stream* and selected stills. The long, narrow "streamlike" shape of the book and its rippled cover make it more an evocation of the film than a simple record. The book is available from 102 Forsyth St., #17, New York, N.Y. 10002.

5. Originally Friedrich recorded both her own questions and her mother's responses. Later she eliminated herself from the sound track and put the questions into textual form. Sometimes we can hear Friedrich in the background when her mother is talking.

6. Actually, the original lyrics are slightly different from those Friedrich sings. In the film, Mr. Dean sings, "No, I can't be a nun, No, I cannot be a nun, for I am so fond of pleasure. I cannot be a nun." Mr. Dean's repetition of "cannot" is true in at least two senses: not only his love of pleasure, but his gender prevents him from being a nun. Friedrich *can* be a nun, but her "won't" and "shall not" suggest she will resist doing so.

7. In an unpublished interview (September 26, 1987), Friedrich indicates that she thought of the snake as relating to the Other Woman, the swan as suggesting the formally dressed nun. Her intercutting between snake and swan thus becomes a symbolic

Images in Our Souls

Cavell, Psychoanalysis, and Cinema

edited by Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan

Photograph from Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* (1973). Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art / Film Stills Archive, New York

In his work on "the Hollywood comedy of remarriage," Stanley Cavell has speculated on the existence of another, adjacent genre that holds no place for the conversation that makes comic remarriage possible. In *Images in Our Souls,* Cavell defines this genre—"the melodrama of the unknown woman"—in which men and women speak different languages, and where men confront the "unknownness" of the other.

The contributors to *Images in Our Souls* explore recurring issues of male skepticism, activity and passivity, and gender differences in cinema. Subjects include Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and *Shadow of a Doubt,* Babenco's *Kiss of the Spiderwoman,* Ophuls's *Letter from an Unknown Woman,* Chaplin's *The Kid,* Bergman's *Cries and Whispers,* and the films of Peter Weir.

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preface to her intercutting between the two women during the body of the narrative.

8. Ironically, some films I've heard used as examples of purely political, nonsensual film-making (e.g., Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx,* Jackie Reynal's *Deux Fois,* and Yvonne Rainer's *Film About a Woman Who . . . ,* have always struck me as visually sensual, and in fact seem more and more visually pleasurable as time passes.

MANTHIA DIAWARA AND ELIZABETH ROBINSON

New Perspectives in African Cinema: An Interview with Cheick Oumar Sissoko

Sissoko is the director of *Nyamanton* (The Garbage Boys), made in Mali in 1986 and regarded by many as a significant turning point in African cinema. The text of the interview derives from a radio program directed by Elizabeth Robinson.

Nyamanton is the most recent in a series of important historical developments in African cinema. Independent African cinema was born in Senegal in 1963 with Sembene Ousmane's *Borom Sarret.* Then in 1968 Sembene's *The Money Order* made history because, for the first time, Africans were speaking African languages on film. In 1973, *Touki-Bouki* by Djibril Diop Mambéty, also of Senegal, entered history as the first African avant-garde film. In *Ceddo* (1977) Sembene was internationally acclaimed for the manner in which he made innovations in film language by using the griot or storyteller as the center of narrative agency. In 1983, *Finye (The Wind),* by Souleymane Cissé of Mali, won the top prizes at Ouagadougou and Carthage—the two most important film festivals in Africa—for unprecedented cinematic depiction of current situations including student strikes and military dictatorship.

Nyamanton is another landmark in the development of African cinema because it links the politics of ilm production with the aesthetics of African cinema in a new way. Bearing first politics in mind, one must realize that 80% of films in Sub-Saharan Africa are coproduced by the French government. Under this condition, the film-maker's crew, the equipment of production and post-production are all from France. Most of the time, only the director and the actors are Africans. It is not hard to understand why France wants to be the biggest producer of African films. Film production enters in the politics of the transfer of technology which France needs to monopolize in Francophone Africa to maintain its post-colonial presence. In addition, the Francophone countries constitute an important economic market for France. If a film-maker turns to Japan or the United States for technological assistance, then an entrepreneur dealing with refrigerators, too, might look for an alternative supplier outside France. From one area to another, the economic leverage of France might be undermined. In the case of film, the consequences would be far-reaching—as far as Paris. The French technicians and the equipment that used to participate in the production of African films would be unemployed. In Francophone Africa, the almost omnipresent French films at the movie theaters might gradually decrease and be replaced by other foreign or domestic films.

Nyamanton is the first African film to go against France's techno-paternalism. Sissoko

preface to her intercutting between the two women during the body of the narrative.

8. Ironically, some films I've heard used as examples of purely political, nonsensual film-making (e.g., Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx,* Jackie Reynal's *Deux Fois,* and Yvonne Rainer's *Film About a Woman Who . . . ,* have always struck me as visually sensual, and in fact seem more and more visually pleasurable as time passes.

MANTHIA DIAWARA AND ELIZABETH ROBINSON

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used a Malian crew and the equipment at the Centre National de Production Cinématographique (CNPC) of Mali. Before him, African directors preferred French cameramen on the ground that they were more experienced. Of course, France only financed films on the condition that French technicians be emloyed. Sissoko, by avoiding these traps, was able to produce his film at a reduced cost of $20,000, compared to the average African feature film produced by France which costs $150,000. The film was edited in Yugoslavia under a Yugoslav-Malian arrangement established since 1964, but only used previously in the post-production of documentary films. The French and English subtitles were done in Athens, Greece, a place much cheaper than Paris. Only the making of new prints is handled in France, by a private business. Thus Sissoko proves the point with *Nyamanton* that films can be made in Africa with African technicians and the equipment that exists in Africa, and at a reduced cost which is not detrimental to their quality.

To turn now to aesthetic issues in African cinema, Sissoko's breakthrough has been in the addition of comedic laughter and melodramatic tears to the didactic messages that already existed in African films. Before *Nyamanton,* the film-makers' commitment to social change was translated in the films by a negation of imperialist and neocolonialist instincts, and an affirmation of a dignified and revolutionary image of Africans. The film language, whether one looks at it from the point of view of the camera angles, the framing, the editing, the *mise-en-scène,* the sound or the characterization, was intellectual; it connoted rather than denoted. The ironic laughter of satire and the serious tears of tragedy were preferred to the "playful" modes of comedy and melodrama.

Sissoko, on the contrary, betrays the intellectual in favor of the popular in *Nyamanton.* The film tells its story with little respect for clean camera lenses or smooth editing; it uses often uneven sound levels and incomplete subtitles. While this violence to film language undoubtedly has the power to make some formalists feel uneasy, it does not distract spectators from the story. Once the narrative is well established, viewers automatically correct the rough edges for fear of being left behind by the narrative flow. Some may even interpret the rough edges in *Nyamanton* as comical, but insightful, statements about the relationship between form and content.

Nyamanton was the favorite film of the public at the Pan-African Film Festival of Ouagadougou. In Bamako (Mali), it broke the record of such blockbusters as *Rambo* and *Jaws.* In 15 days it was seen by well over 35,000 spectators and it had recouped its cost of production, including the blowing up of the 16mm original to 35mm and the cost of several prints. The children who play the leading roles have become famous in the city, and people laugh and quote to each other famous lines from their dialogue. A businessman, touched by their performance, gave $400 to be shared between them. *Nyamanton* contains the same didactic messages as the films of Souleymane Cissé and Sembene, but Sissoko communicates better with wider audiences by restoring play and laughter to African cinema. The irony, of course, is that Sissoko, who studied film at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in the 1970s, with semioticians like Christian Metz, eschews intellectualism in favor of a more populist style than that of other African film-makers.

Sissoko knew that he would encounter problems distributing his film outside of Mali because it was not coproduced with France, and could not, therefore, enjoy the same promotional advantages as other African films. Usually, when France coproduces African films, it places them in festivals, invites the press to see them, and sometimes distributes them in Paris theaters and on French television. On the other hand, films produced in Africa outside of the French circuit do not make it. Paris is the passport for international recognition for African films. Sissoko challenged the state of things again by struggling to show his film at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. When *Nyamanton* was shown at Edinburgh it was screened at 1 am, using a workprint, and the subtitles were in French. But the 60 or so people who were in the theater stayed to the end of the film and applauded Sissoko. Of course the reaction was not the same as the one in Bamako. Not knowing Bambara (the language of Mali spoken in the film) or French, the Edinburgh viewers missed the humor, but they were impressed by the well-made story, the acting of the children, and the images of a country caught by surprise while it was being choked by

NYAMANTON: *The "garbage boys"*

contradictions and dead ends. The film was selected for inclusion at the London festival, the San Francisco festival, and other festivals in Italy and Germany. On his way back to Mali, Sissoko stopped in Paris and organized a press screening. To their credit, Frenchmen like Jean Rouch and Louis Marcorelles loved *Nyamanton*. Rouch even proposed it for the prestigious Georges Sadoul Prize. As for Marcorelles, he arranged for the film to participate in the Mannheim festival where it won the gold medal for foreign entries. However, at the French screening, people criticized Sissoko for "sloppy" mixing, "out-of-synch" editing and "bad" framing. The officials of the French government went so far as to propose a financial grant for remixing and re-editing the film so that it would have a better chance of being distributed in France. Sissoko, of course, rejected their proposition, arguing that he was looking forward to the financing of his next film. When *Nyamanton* was later shown in London, it was very well received. In San Francisco, it was among the five most popular films of the festival.

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Perhaps you could begin by describing a bit of the film for us? Just a brief story-line. . . .

The theme of this film concerns Malian society in particular, but actually, it refers in a certain measure to all the social problems that poor families run into in African societies and in Third World societies, and even indeed in industrialized societies. It is about the children of a poor family who observe a society in which they as well as their parents are struck by the social injustice and the lack of education. So it's a movie which denounces aspects of this society by the use of truculent scenes as well as dramatic scenes.

There is one scene in the film that you said inspired you to write the rest of the story. We are referring to the moment in the film when children are first seen carrying their school desks from home to the school.

These are scenes that at the end of the twentieth century are a drama for the human race. Every morning these children have to carry benches on their heads while going to school, carry them back home in the evening and start the process again every day. In the story, I make them go to school in the morning and in the afternoon they have to work in order to help their families make ends meet because their purchasing power is ridiculous.

Tell us just a bit more about these conditions. Presumably not only the children but the country is impoverished to the point that very basic needs are not provided for. You made a choice in this film not simply to document these conditions but to dramatize them. Tell us how your contribution fits into the African cinema more generally. Is this a departure from the cinema of your predecessors?

The need to give African cinema the face of the cinematographic art, to tell a story while using the cinematographic art, becomes of a capital importance because in order to have a message go through, it has to be acceptable. It must be interesting to the people. The importance of cinema is that it is a medium which dazzles, which captivates and can strike a person. So, the goal of the film-maker is to strike people during the minutes the film lasts. He reaches his goal by toying with people's emotions, by triggering laughter, fear, or tears.

Some of Sembene's films are certainly very dramatic in addition to documenting in the way you described the conditions in which people exist. Indeed some of them even ridicule the bourgeoisie and colonial and postcolonial Africa. But are we correct in assuming that compared to Nyamanton, *those films enjoyed relatively less success in Africa?*

Sembene hasn't made a film in ten years. But his first films, which were very successful, were made in 1963 and 1968. I'm referring to *Borom Sarret* and *The Money Order.* The media have since developed in Africa, enabling *Nyamanton* to be known more quickly than Sembene's films. However, the difference between *Nyamanton* and Sembene's most successful movie, *The Money Order,* is that *Nyamanton* is about the conditions of living, the denunciation of a policy from the perspective of the disadvantaged. Both films are about social problems but the difference lies in that *The Money Order* is the look of an intellectual. The same goes for Souleymane Cissé who shows our societies without trying to show the paralyzing effects our social problems have on the poor—whereas *Nyamanton* shows society through the eyes of the poor, stressing the paralysis and the unacceptable situation. My aim is to awaken the masses. So *Nyamanton* tries to show the social dynamic whereas *The Money Order* is an individual case, not really linked to most people's lives, to the social relations of society. That's why the people of Africa have called *Nyamanton* "our movie."

When film became a popular entertainment in this country and perhaps elsewhere in the West as well, it was marketed as the poor or the working people's entertainment and it seems that this is an interesting parallel because the point of the entertainment was a distraction in early American films. So it was something to keep the masses preoccupied. But what you're saying, is equally something for the masses of people but something which gives them voice rather than distracts them.

I tried to set it straight that the goal of *Nyamanton* is the awakening of consciousness by explaining to the population that their misery, the fact that they are exploited, is not due to fatalism nor to Allah's will. It's due to the social relations of exploitation existing in that society, to the fact that a minority is exploiting them. I try to explain in the film that they can solve their problems by defending their rights, which are the rights of a majority.

Let us talk more about the sort of mission that you see in film-making. Nyamanton *won seven awards at the Pan-African Film Festival in Ouagadougou, and four awards at the Carthage Film Festival. With these festivals now being regularly held in different parts of Africa, and supported by international organizations such as UNESCO and the Organization of African Unity, what role do you see film playing in very broad terms both politically and socially as well as a communications and entertainment medium?*

When I went to Stanford University to talk about my film, somebody asked exactly the same question. Let me try to elaborate on what I said there. If you look at Africa today and at the rate of literacy, film becomes a very useful tool. That is, if you make a film which is accessible to people, they can see the images and they have the sound and therefore you can basically tell them what you want to tell them. Whereas if you write, if you use the media by using French for example, in Mali, or English in Nigeria, or if you write in the newspaper in English or French, people basically pick it up and throw it away. So film in that sense has become an essential tool in Africa. Culturally also, film becomes this tool which enables Africans to describe themselves, to create images of themselves and also to correct the image of Africa as produced by Hollywood and colonial literature. So film is doing that but more than that, film is also bringing out the cultural unity of Africans. I was a guest lecturer in Professor Teshome Gabriel's class at UCLA and there was a Nigerian student and he referred to a scene in the film between young kids and their grandmother. He said that is exactly the way it is in Nigeria too. So in that sense, through one

film, you see how African countries are seeing their common cultural heritage and I may add black American and the universal cultures because if people see what is happening in Africa, then maybe people will relate to each other in more human terms.

I'd like to add that I made this film after looking at the situation of Africa which put an end to the colonial period only twenty-five years ago. That is to say that at the time of independence, African masses had been made and were left backward, illiterate. Too many of our governments want to go on maintaining them in the same situation, want to keep maintaining our culture at the periphery of the world. It's true that if one dominates someone else culturally, one manages more easily to maintain that person in a state of economic dependence. So of course, linking the cinematographic art to life, to the social problems, is a necessity for us because there are many problems to solve in Africa. Unfortunately, film is only a little contribution to this undertaking. However, its importance is not negligible.

Can you talk about the difficulties and the facilities of film-making? Presumably one doesn't have to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars, stopping city traffic, for example, as one does here. But the process of film production must be a very different one . . .

The problem of cinematographic production for African film-makers is similar to having a splinter in the foot. The youth of African cinema and the lack of political willingness on the part of the African states have not encouraged the emergence of producers, of people who have money and who want to finance the movie industry. Finding some money to produce a film is tantamount to practicing witchcraft. After that, when one manages to find some money, technical problems occur and the postproduction cannot take place in Africa. One has to go to Europe.

Can you comment on the production of Nyamanton*?*

The production of *Nyamanton* is a long story. Because it's a film of denunciation and because of the government, *Nyamanton* was made incognito. In order to get some money, we presented the script of a documentary film which was accepted by the National Center of Production and the Minister of Information. When they financed it, I presented the scenario

Sembene Ousmane (left) and Cheick Oumar Cissoko at the Ougadougou Festival

of a feature film to my crew, which was the idea of *Nyamanton*. We were given $20,000 for the documentary. We had the equipment and the technicians at the National Center of Production. We looked for the actors by ourselves and agreed on some sacrifices since we had been given almost nothing for the shooting expenditures. The production of the 16mm was done with $20,000. The actors were to be paid later on. The postproduction took place in Yugoslavia because that country has had an agreement of cooperation with Mali for 23 years. But the producer, a government employee who was unaware of the feature film, signed a contract with his counterpart in Yugoslavia to finish a 60-minute documentary film. The cost of the editing was taken out of the $20,000 budget. When I arrived in Yugoslavia, I negotiated thirty more minutes with the director of the lab. This without the agreement of the producer in Mali because, according to him, I was supposed to finish a documentary film. Since the lab had seen the film and the chief editor liked it, he himself insisted with his boss to keep the thirty extra minutes. That's how the feature film was finished and the day it was shown, everybody was surprised because they were expecting something else. The production of films for many an African director is as difficult as that. That's why African film-makers make a movie every three or five years.

Having produced the film and encountered all those difficulties brings us to the other question we wanted to ask you. And that has to do with the distribution of the film. Can you describe how films are distributed in places like Mali, West Africa, and how they are brought to

the attention of a broader audience. Presumably, some of the distribution problems have also been or are also being solved by some governments.

It would be rather difficult to speak of improvement except in the consciousness which is necessary in order to solve this issue of distribution, because it is the second splinter in the filmmaker's foot. A good attempt was the creation of the International Consortium of Film Distribution between 14 African countries. This creation was due to the struggle of some filmmakers like Sembene Ousmane. But in this case also, the political willingness of the African states was again lacking. Sembene ran into problems of distribution in the world but also in his own country. Problems of world-wide distribution are due to the powerful foreign distribution companies, American as well as French. In 1968, a movie of the quality of *The Money Order* was equal to those shown everywhere in the world. It went against the argument that the African cinema was not mature, was a cinema of amateurs. Very often, a distribution company will buy a very good African film so that it will disappear from the circuits and will not be shown in movie theaters. In his own country, Sembene ran into problems with Senghor (who was then president) because of his movie *Ceddo,* known worldwide. And this movie was not distributed in Senegal. And in other African countries, African films cannot be distributed for the same reason: because distribution companies rule the game. In the case of *Nyamanton,* as in the case of all films, we had to take our film "under our arm" and to bring it to the different countries which were asking for it. We had the luck that this movie was very strongly asked for. So the countries which have asked for it are about to receive it and it is currently being shown in the Ivory Coast in very good conditions. But the filmmaker still has to go to these different countries. He becomes a merchant after having been an artist. The distributor does not come to him. So this problem remains to be solved.

Reviews

THE STEPFATHER

Director: Joseph Ruben. Script: Donald E. Westlake. Producer: Jay Benson. Photography: John Lindley. Music: Patrick Moraz. New Century/Vista.

Can a commercial psychological thriller modeled after Hitchcock's *Psycho* offer a progressive reading for contemporary women? Can such a film draw upon the exploitative elements of the genre and simultaneously serve as a radical reformation of the same? *The Stepfather,* an independent production directed by Joseph Ruben, brings together many of the major themes current in recent horror films, especially anti-feminist sentiments circulating in contemporary popular culture. However, Ruben and screenwriter Donald E. Westlake resolve the generic conflicts in a new and important way.

The plot relies upon many of the character types and narrative moves which have become familiar to contemporary thriller audiences, dating back to John Carpenter's *Halloween.* This is hardly surprising when one notes that Ruben's previous credits include *The Pom Pom Girls* (1976), *Joyride* (1977), *Our Winning Season* (1978), and *Dreamscape* (1984). The story centers on Jerry Blake (Terry O'Quinn), who having murdered his previous wife and children, is now remarried to a young widow, Susan (Shelley Hack), and is living in a quiet Seattle suburb where he sells real estate. Jerry and Susan seem the ideal couple. Only Susan's 16-year-old daughter Stephanie (Jill Schoelen) mars the image of the perfect family. Getting into one scrape after another, Stephanie not only has failed to come to terms with the loss of her real father, but she also detects something disturbing about her stepfather, which she confides to her therapist, Dr. Bondurant (Charles Lanyer).

Like other recent films, most specifically *Blue Velvet, The Stepfather* addresses the dark side of family life and small-town America. More unusual is the fact that the film takes a feminist position, foregrounding patriarchal power but positing the maternal order in opposition to the destructive elements of patriarchy.

Partway through the film, after an argument with Stephanie concerning the good-night kiss she gives her boyfriend, Jerry decides to rid himself of this family as he has done in the past "when they disappointed him." This leads to the dramatic climax—Jerry's assault on Susan and his prolonged attack on Stephanie. In the

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final struggle Susan, although badly wounded, uses a pistol to shoot Jerry, while Stephanie delivers the final stroke with Jerry's knife. The film ends in the family yard as Susan and Stephanie, fully recovered, enter their home arm in arm.

This ending, along with much that precedes it, serves to valorize women's maternal role and the strong female bonding which exists between mothers and daughters. Such valorization is an exception in mainstream cinema, both past and present. In those films where such bonding does occur (for instance, in *Stella Dallas*), the narrative works towards the removal of this female threat to patriarchal power by the reassertion of the heterosexual couple (as in the wedding scene in *Stella Dallas*). Such is not the case with *The Stepfather.*

Through an analysis of *The Stepfather,* and specifically of the ways in which the film offers many of the pleasures associated with the pre-Oedipal stage—bonding with the mother, feelings of plentitude and unity—I propose to demonstrate how the work offers new forms of cinematic pleasure for women in a genre notorious for its exploitation of women and the female body. As a further consideration, I will also discuss the ways in which the screening situation itself calls upon the memories of the pre-Oedipal period and stimulates the reemergence of repressed desires for the mother (for male as well as female viewers), which are amply reimagined in this work.

In his essay on the American horror film,[1] Robin Wood concludes that indeed the monster has now become *the American family,* and that the elements so carefully repressed in American life—sexuality, and particularly female and childhood sexuality—have all returned to haunt us. According to Wood, the older construct of the monster was simply our repressed fears projected onto a grotesque figure of terror. However, as he notes, since *Psycho,* the horror film has become both American and familial and the monster has taken on a new guise.

Wood sets out several elements which define the new genre, including the image of "the terrible house"; women as the ultimate object of the protagonist's animus; the release of sexuality presented as perverted, monstrous, and excessive; the ambivalence toward the family; and the theme of "the double." All of these are important themes in *The Stepfather.*

Houses (both those of Blake's first and second marriage) function, not simply as the scenes of the crimes, but also as claustrophic spaces within which desires and tensions are exacerbated. The Blake household, once the domain of the mother, has now become subject to the law of the father. As Stephanie complains, Jerry has taken over *their* home. Where once the family seemingly romped with free abandon, they now sit stiffly at the dinner table, heads bowed in prayer. With the arrival of Jerry, domestic space becomes filled with tensions, secrets, fears, furtive gazes, rivalries, and uncontrollable emotions—which will eventually erupt in a murderous massacre.

Jerry and his new family before they too "disappoint" him: THE STEPFATHER

"The terrible house" is closely related to ambivalent attitudes towards the family. Much is made in the movie about the perfect family —families from television dramas and sitcoms like *Father Knows Best, Leave It to Beaver, Mr. Ed,* and *The Waltons.* In TV wonderland, parents and children work together with perfect trust and love, without any deep-seated problems. Those problems which do emerge are quickly resolved (certainly within the half hour or hour time slot). Life is clean, beautiful, and perfect. Unfortunately for Jerry, life does not always imitate television. Stephanie has become a problem student and does not have the warm feelings for him that he has tried to cultivate. Stephanie also poses other difficulties. Her wish to go away to boarding school (a wise decision according to her therapist), is seen by Jerry as a break-up of the family unit. Further, her movement into sexual adulthood also threatens to destroy the stable self-sufficiency of father-mother-daughter. For Jerry then, his new family, the means whereby he seeks to achieve the perfection of his ideal family, is both a loved object and a hateful disappointment, producing ambivalent feelings which he cannot reconcile.

The other themes which Wood cites, such as

women as the ultimate object of the protagonist's animus, appear self-evident. Although not all of his victims are female, Jerry's primary animus is turned against Susan and Stephanie; the murders of Dr. Bondurant and Jim Ogilvie (his former brother-in-law), are principally protective measures to avoid detection or thwart an attack. Jerry's response to Stephanie's budding sexuality reflects a form of "sexual disgust" which Wood finds prevalent in many recent horror films. What is unique about *The Stepfather,* however, is that the film's structuring devices do not lock us into Jerry's subjective point of view. Hence we are distanced from his reactions to female sexuality (sexuality as perverted and monstrous), which allows us to critique his emotions rather than forcing us to identify with them. This difference sets *The Stepfather* sharply apart from other works in the genre, as I will detail below.

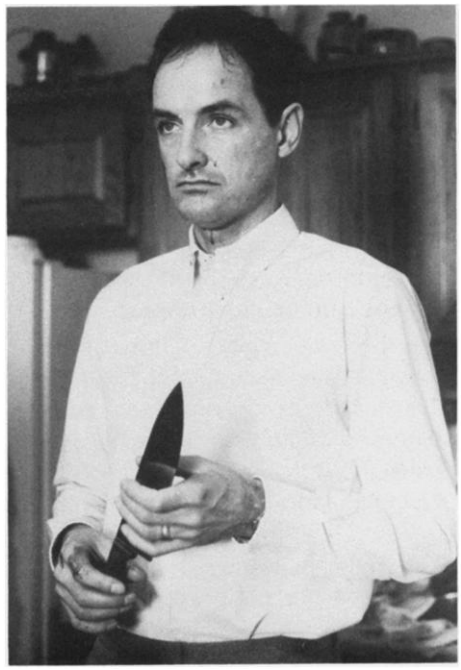
No film better critiques the family institution than *The Stepfather.* Like *Blue Velvet,* the film opens with an idyllic view of small-town America. In *The Stepfather,* the opening shot is a high-angle view of a town street, filled with autumn leaves at the height of their beauty. This sight could occur anywhere in the USA. But even before Ruben rudely demystifies this vision, there is a discomforting feeling which subtly warns us that something is amiss. As in *Blue Velvet,* the discordant feeling emanates from intense colors which look patently artificial and undermine our belief in what we are shown. Such a reaction seems to illustrate Hitchcock's dictim that "things are not always what they seem." And sure enough, in *Blue Velvet* the credit sequence is soon followed by a disquieting scene depicting an older man in the throes of a seizure, ending with an equally disturbing track into the grass which reveals swarms of slimy insects.

In *The Stepfather,* we move from the autumnal exterior to a bloody interior as Jerry washes, dresses, takes on a new identity, and calmly walks past the aftermath of his massacre, straightening toys and over-turned chairs as he leaves. In both films the message is clear—behind the doors and underneath the calm exterior, there is passion, struggle, and death.

This message, of course, is not totally new. In the seminal work *Psycho* (1960), Hitchcock dispelled a belief in the innocence of American rural life and the happy family, and no contemporary psychological thriller is without indebtedness (and in many cases direct reference to) this work. *The Stepfather* is no exception. The similarities are numerous. In both films we have a psychotic multiple-murderer who holds conversations with an imaginary parent. (In *The Stepfather* Jerry alternates between the punishing father and the abused son.) In both works the victims are women (and in *The Stepfather,* there are children as well), who meet their end, knifed in an angry and bloody symbolic rape. Like *Psycho, The Stepfather* includes a psychiatrist who helps explain the protagonist's pathology. Likewise, both narratives contain a private investigator working on his own, who becomes another of the murderer's victims.

Visually and symbolically *The Stepfather* utilizes several familiar icons from the earlier work. Most prominent is the house itself, a large wooden structure which seems to typify postwar America in the way that *Psycho*'s Gothic mansion typified a previous era. Like Bates, Blake (note the similarity) is associated with birds. Jerry works for the American Eagle Realty Company, a name which resonates with predation, national pride and patriarchial power. A large stuffed bird also appears behind Jerry's head during the Thanksgiving dinner scene. Jerry's private space, like Norman's in *Psycho,* is located in the cellar—a symbolically subterranean region where he keeps his power tools, builds birdhouses (replicas of the homes he sells) and vents his anger; there repressed and buried memories reemerge. The two men also demonstrate a penchant for disguises, although they function differently in each work. Perhaps the most obvious reference to *Psycho* is the shower sequence (can any shower scene ever be neutral or innocent again?) which precedes Jerry's attack on Stephanie. Like the original, this scene features a nude woman and the prerequisite over-head shot.

However, whereas many current *hommages* to Hitchcock films, such as *The Bedroom Window* (with references to both *Rear Window* and *Vertigo*), do little more than restate the original without the complex artistry of the master, *The Stepfather* reworks all of the major players and themes to state a new premise about American life, one which I propose works both as an expression of male hostility and fear, resulting from the social gains made by women in the last twenty years, and as an affirmation of female



THE STEPFATHER: *Stephanie defends herself against Jerry's murderous attack*

bonding which has emerged as a viable alternative for many women during the same two decades. No doubt the latter has also exacerbated the former. On a deeper level, *The Stepfather* also provides one of the clearest articulations of cinema's relationship with the pre-Oedipal stage expounded in the writings of Jacques Lacan and Gilles Deleuze and applied to film studies by Christian Metz, Charles Altman, and Gaylyn Studlar.

Following the prologue in which Jerry Blake so calmly leaves the scene of his crime, the film moves forward a year. We are introduced to a pretty and pert Stephanie and her equally attractive mother in a playful scene where the two take turns pelting each other with leaves. The game ends as they roll in a bed of leaves. Both appear wrapped up in and totally happy with one another. The romp is soon interrupted with the arrival of Jerry setting into play, not the classic Oedipal conflict wherein the daughter sees herself as a rival for the father's affections, but rather a struggle for the love and attention of the mother. Susan's willingness to drop Stephanie when Jerry arrives home leaves Stephanie feeling resentful and abandoned.

What immediately makes *The Stepfather* distinct from *Psycho* is the development of Stephanie's character as a parallel to Jerry's. Here we have the theme of "the double"—Stephanie/Stepfather. In this regard the two form two sides of one coin, echoing themes from Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt,* which is also set in small-town America. In *Shadow,* Uncle Charlie arrives in town, a secret murderer of wealthy widows and a psychotic misogynist beneath his charming manner. By film's end, his niece, Charlie, who had admired and identified with her uncle, has come to learn the truth not only about her uncle, but also about her own dark instincts. Like him in spirit, she is nonetheless recuperated into the film's narrative, safely married off to the town's detective, who will, we suppose, keep her in check and protect her from herself. Some of these themes are also at work in *The Stepfather.* And if there is any doubt of Ruben's intentions, he dissolves from a close-up of Jerry to our first view of Stephanie, reminiscent of a similar dissolve from Joseph Cotten to Teresa Wright in the beginning of *Shadow.*

As Stephanie meets with her therapist, Dr. Bondurant (the *good* doctor), or in conversations with her mother and best friend, Karen, we learn that she wants her mother for herself, has succeeded in splitting her father ideal into good father (her real father, significantly named Maine)/bad father, and also harbors hostile feelings towards her stepfather.

The conflict here is thus between pre-Oedipal desire as exemplified by Stephanie and post-Oedipal desire as exemplified by Jerry. Reversing

Psycho, the pre-Oedipal wishes of Stephanie to bond with her mother are presented as healthy, while the post-Oedipal behavior of Jerry, usually taken as normal, ultimately reveals sadism and psychosis. In some ways Stephanie can be compared to the Teresa Wright character in *Shadow of a Doubt,* but she does not desire Jerry as Charlie had wanted her uncle. (A comparison of each daughter's attitude towards her mother adds to the emotional divergence between the two works.) The conflict then between Stephanie and Jerry takes on a broader significance than is initially apparent. The degree to which their opposing psychic drives are developed as a subtext in the film, together with the emergence of strong pre-Oedipal themes, mark *The Stepfather* as an important departure from most Hollywood films which are concerned almost exclusively with Oedipal issues.

From Stephanie's perspective, the film's ending seems almost too good to be true. With Jerry now safely dead, along with the film's only other attractive and possibly eligible males, Stephanie has her mother all to herself. Having jointly accomplished the murder, the two now inhabit the house alone. In the final shot, Stephanie wrecks Jerry's wooden birdhouse, sawing through the tall cyclindral post, toppling this symbol of the American dream from its pedestal. With this stroke Ruben has destroyed the American home with its male head of household, leaving it impotent on the ground. Likewise, he has reconstituted the family couple as two women, seemingly sufficient unto themselves (certainly safer). In one image, Ruben has represented men's worst fears and perhaps many women's fondest hopes.

It is also important to note that in depicting the mother/daughter relationship, Ruben displays an amazing degree of mutual respect and equality, despite their age difference. The two nurture one another and are able to talk honestly. This relationship is in stark contrast with the aspirations of Jerry, who enjoys being the man of the house, making the decisions, and taking charge. Ruben emphasizes his need for order and control and his desire for perfection, the kind of perfection which leaves little room for messiness (pelting leaves) or change and growth (Stephanie's sexual maturity and eventual separation).

Thus in reshaping *Psycho,* and to a lesser degree *Shadow of a Doubt,* Ruben and Westlake have totally reversed the dynamics and implications of the original. Whereas in *Psycho* Norman manages to kill the female protagonist, Marion, whose sexuality touches off an uncontrollable murderous desire, in *The Stepfather* Jerry is inadequate to the task and is himself knifed by Stephanie. It is noteworthy that it is Stephanie's emerging sexuality which throws Jerry into a psychotic fit and leads to his decision to kill both mother and daughter. The fact that a virginal heroine is able to save herself from attack has been a common plot device since *Halloween.* But in most horror films the survivors form a heterosexual couple. *The Stepfather* breaks this pattern in a bold, clearcut way.

Also of importance is the figure of the psychiatrist. In *Psycho* he serves as the voice of authority, providing audiences with access to the truth, however limited or subverted his monologue may appear. However, here, along with all other male authority figures, he is eliminated, to be replaced by a female.

On a deeper level, *The Stepfather* seems to speak for the reemergence of the repressed pre-Oedipal feelings between mother and child, especially between mother and daughter. The young male child's mandate to separate from mother and to assume the cultural and physiopsychological aspects of the father are well documented in Freud's description of the Oedipal stage. However, at a later stage the male can reinvest his desire in a new female partner. The female child, however, equally encouraged to separate from mother, is expected to shift her sexual attraction to the opposite sex. Little encouragement is given for female bonding or for close relationships between women (although they most always exist), no doubt due to men's fear that it will ultimately result in male exclusion. One need only think of the demeaning perception on the part of many men of female gatherings or the persistent depiction of female friendship in so many movies as a competition between women for the affections of a male.

The Stepfather not only valorizes the mother/daughter bond, but it also gives new emphasis to the importance of the pre-Oedipal stage—Lacan's Imaginary Order wherein the child is at one with the mother and makes no distinction between the two bodies, in contrast

to the post-Oedipal stage—the Symbolic Order wherein the male child identifies with the language and the law of the father and takes his place in culture and the female child enters culture with the burden of lack. As formulated by Lacan, the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic begins with the Mirror Stage (technically the end of the pre-Oedipal stage), in which the child is able to distinguish itself from its mother's body and thus to constitute itself as a separate individual. It is significant that in the final episodes of *The Stepfather,* Stephanie has locked herself into the bathroom. As Jerry, wielding a butcher knife, attempts to break down the door, his pounding shatters the full-length mirror inside the bathroom. Stephanie uses a piece of shattered glass to strike out and wound Jerry. Symbolically she has used the mirror to rebel against male authority and to cripple male power.

In addition to the relative importance of each parental figure in each stage (mother/pre-Oedipal vs. father/post-Oedipal), the two stages also embody a distinction in terms of sexual desire. In "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema,"[2] Gaylyn Studlar draws upon the writings of Gilles Deleuze to set out the elements of desire which fuel the pre-Oedipal and post-Oedipal stages—most particularly masochism, which is associated with pre-Oedipal desires for union with the mother, and sadism, which is linked to post-Oedipal desires for dominance and control. Concomitant with these desires is the sought-for source of gratification, namely genital sex which is associated with sadism, and pregenital sex, an aspect of masochism, which seeks a symbiotic bond with the mother, the first source of pleasure. At this stage, mother is perceived as a symbol of plentitude, not castration (as happens later).

Susan is represented as the oral mother of the pre-Oedipal stage. We see her either in the kitchen preparing food, in the bedroom performing sex, or in nurturing conversations with Stephanie. Susan thus symbolizes the source of masochist pleasure connected with the pre-Oedipal stage.

Jerry, on the other hand, reflects the sadistic tendencies related to the post-Oedipal period. His need to dominate the household, to control each situation, and to maintain a sense of order (a word he uses frequently) drives him to seek the perfect family, to make them a part of his perfect world, a world utterly in his control.

Extending Studlar's formulations to a larger canvas, the canvas of the movie screen, leads to an analysis of the ways in which the film-going experience replicates the experience of the pre-Oedipal stage. As many critics have pointed out,[3] film viewing stimulates regression on the part of the spectator (brought on by the darkened room, the lack of sensory stimuli and the large screen upon which a viewer may project private fantasies), especially to an early oral stage in which the child feels at one with the mother (replicated by a viewer's easy identification with characters on the screen) and willingly gives up the self to passive pleasures. Further, as Charles Altman points out in his essay, "Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Discourse,"[4] film "sets up an Imaginary relationship between the film spectator and the world which he sees mirrored on the screen. . . . The mirror approach recaptures the extent to which the film viewer, like the child in the mirror stage, can make sense and unity only by at first accepting a lie, which then calls for correction."

Studlar expounds on these ideas in her discussion of the "dream screen" and its relationship with masochism.

> Masochistic fantasy is dominated by oral pleasure, the desire to return to the nondifferentiated body state of the mother/child, and the fear of abandonment (the state of nonbreast, nonplenitude). In a sense, these same wishes are duplicated by the film spectator who becomes a child again in response to the dream screen of cinema. This dream screen affords spectatorial pleasure in creating the first fetish—the mother as nurturing environment. The spectator in the cinematic dream screen regresses to a state that Baudry says is analogous to the oral period. Like the fetish objects that follow, the dream screen restores the sense of wholeness of the first symbiotic relationship as it restores the unity of the undifferentiated ego/ego ideal. It functions like a "good blanket" reuniting the spectator/child with the earliest object of desire that lessens the anxiety of the ego loosened from body boundaries.[5]

Yet despite these arguments, traditional classical cinema has always worked to resolve the Oedipal situation by the establishment of a heterosexual couple as the narrative closure. Few if any are the films which posit the pre-Odeipal as a possibility unless the protagonist has lapsed into psychosis (as in De Palma's *Sisters* or *Psycho* itself). On the other hand, obviously the supposed resolution of Oedipal

conflicts comes with a price—a series of repressions, above all of desire for the mother. *The Stepfather* resolves this conflict in a new and radical manner.

If we apply Kaja Silverman's reading of Lacan, the Mirror Stage coexists with the Symbolic Order and is mutually consonant.[6] As such it need not be repressed for healthy functioning. Thus in *The Stepfather* we are offered two desiring subjects: Stephanie poses one extreme in her desire for the mother and her rejection of the father as an intrusion into this relationship, while Jerry poses an alternative in his frightening identification with the law of the father, his desire to dominate both Susan and Stephanie and his function as an obstacle between mother and daughter. In the film as in life, this has destructive consequences.

In this manner *The Stepfather* reveals what previously films have repressed, namely the desire for the mother. Unlike *Psycho,* where this desire leads to psychosis and destruction, in *The Stepfather* it is treated as natural and normal. In fact, it is Jerry's inability to come to terms with these forces which lead to his destruction, and in this film he rather than Stephanie is the psychotic. One surmises that in the narrative's unforeseen future, Stephanie will go on to form heterosexual relationships with men, but without having to forego the nurturing relationship with her mother.[7]

All of this places the mother in a much more dominant position than those formulations of cinema based on Oedipal narratives which emphasize the need to separate from mother and to distinguish what is male from what is nonmale, making sexual differences the major propelling feature of the plot.

Thus in *The Stepfather,* the mother is restored to her rightful place, or not dismantled in the first place. The final scene at last brings down Jerry's birdhouse, a symbol of the structures which have confined women in their roles as cooks, cleaners, and caretakers, subject to the law of the father. It is noteworthy that Stephanie uses Jerry's power tool to destroy the construction. It is to be assumed that Susan and Stephanie will create a new social order, one no longer conceived in hierarchial terms, but closer perhaps to a nurturing society, which Adrienne Rich calls "synocentric" culture.[8] Whatever it will be, it will no longer be "a man's world."

—PATRICIA BRETT ERENS

NOTES

1. "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film,* Robin Wood and Richard Lippe, eds. (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), pp. 7-28.
2. Gaylyn Studlar, "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema," *Movies and Methods,* vol. II, Bill Nichols, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 602-621.
3. Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus," *Camera Obscura* 1 (Fall 1976), pp. 105-126; Charles F. Altman, "Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Discourse," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 2, no. 3 (August 1977), pp. 257-272; Robert Eberwein, "Reflections on the Breast," *Wide Angle* 4, no. 3 (Summer 1981), pp. 48-53; Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier,* trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); and Studlar, cited above, among others.
4. Charles Altman, "Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Discourse, *Movies and Methods,* vol. II, Bill Nichols, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 522-523.
5. Studlar, p. 614.
6. Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 161.
7. Of interest here is the process which Freud identified as "the negative Oedipus complex," discussed at length in a forthcoming book by Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustical Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press). As Silverman points out, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) Freud states that the complete Oedipus complex is actually twofold, both positive and negative, and while the male child may indeed see himself as his father's competitor for the love of the mother, he may simultaneously display "an affectionate feminine attitude to his father and a corresponding jealousy and hostility towards his mother." Such ambiguity likewise applies to female sexual development.

   Silverman quotes from "The Evolution of the Oedipus Complex in Women," *Psychoanalysis and Female Sexuality,* ed. Hendrik M. Ruitenbeek (New Haven: College and University Press, 1966), pp. 40-41. Having entered "the negative Oedipal" phase, the young girl "wants to conquer the mother for herself and to get rid of the father." Such emotions are not unlike those of Stephanie in *The Stepfather.*

   Silverman further notes that early on Freud stressed "the continuity rather than (as might be expected) the discontinuity between the little girl's love for her mother" and the "lengthy duration of the little girl's erotic attachment to her mother." Silverman argues for the importance of taking up Freud's notion of "the negative Oedipus complex" which was later supplanted with other paradigms.

   The value for women, I believe, is that "the negative Oedipus" formulation provides a space wherein female heterosexual attachments (to the father or to other males) can exist without the concomitant necessity of rejecting the mother, and that it offers a more complex view of female sexual desire. It also allows for female maternal bonding to exist within the Symbolic Order rather than exclusively in some utopian paradise which is commonly associated with the pre-Oedipal phase.

   The above theories are also relevant to the findings of Nancy Chodorow in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), wherein she demonstrates not only that the bonding between mothers and daughters goes well beyond the pre-Oedipal stage, but also that in the main, daughters never entirely break with their mothers. She also asserts that while Freud felt that separation from the mother was an essential part of masculine development, it need not be the norm for females.
8. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976), chapter IV.

GONZA THE SPEARMAN

Director: Masahiro Shinoda. Script: Taeko Tomioka. Photography: Kazuo Miyagawa. Editor: Sachiko Yamachi. Producer: Kiyoshi Iwashita. Shochiku.

Masahiro Shinoda burst onto the international movie scene in 1969 with *Double Suicide,* his flamboyant version of a puppet play by Chikamatsu. Now Shinoda has returned to Chikamatsu once again, using another *bunraku* drama, the 1717 *Yari no Gonza Kasane Katabira (Spearman Gonza's Illicit Love*), as the basis for *Gonza the Spearman,* winner of the Silver Bear award at the Berlin Film Festival. The two films provide a neat measure of how far Shinoda has travelled, as well as a reminder that historical films can be more than costume drama, that is, more than a fanciful or nostalgic escape from the present.

Along with Oshima, Shinoda will perhaps always be identified with the so-called Ofuna New Wave. As young assistant directors at Shochiku's Ofuna studio in the early 1960s, they were given a chance to direct because of fortuitous circumstances including both the success of the French New Wave and the bewilderment of studio heads beset by falling profits. Shinoda's first films represent unhappy compromises between the director's desires and the studio's demands, and met with only mixed success. Beginning with *Tears on the Lion's Mane* (1962), however, Shinoda was able to make films the way he wanted. The result was a string of films that established Shinoda as a major figure in the Japanese cinema, including the yakuza drama *Pale Flower* (1963), the period film *Assassination* (1964), and the adaptation of Nobel prize winner Yasunari Kawabata's *With Beauty and Sorrow* (1965). Yet Shinoda remained little-known outside Japan.

Double Suicide changed that. The very first scene makes it clear that Shinoda is pulling out all the stops. As the puppeteers prepare backstage at a real *bunraku* theater, Shinoda himself appears, speaking on the phone to tell the scenarist that the cemetery at the end should be a good place for him to indulge his fetishism with space—which is just what happens. Throughout the film, Shinoda uses devices that would be mere gimmicks in other hands: not just freeze frame and slow motion, but an assortment of techniques worthy of Pirandello or Brecht. Shinoda's wife, Shima Iwashita, plays

both the courtesan and the wife; the sets include supergraphic versions of figures from traditional woodblock prints; in the most original twist of all, the black puppeteer figures enter into the action not only as stagehands but as instruments of fate, helping the wife pack kimonos, holding a letter up to the audience to read, and, finally, helping the husband commit suicide. With an intense musical score by Toru Takemitsu and the striking quality of its black-and-white images, *Double Suicide* seems just as modern today as when it first came out. Given Shinoda's love of extreme stylization and his obsession with sex and violence, it's not surprising that he is one of Martin Scorsese's favorite directors.

Where *Double Suicide* is a young man's film, full of energy and bravado, *Gonza* is an older, if not old man's film, understated yet absolutely assured. Both testify to the complexity of Shinoda's vision. And, of course, Chikamatsu's.

Double Suicide presents a merchant trapped between his wife, his children, and his in-laws on one side and his love for a courtesan on the other. The title makes the outcome clear from the start. *Gonza* is a more complicated story. Gonza is a samurai, a master of his weapon, who has even been honored by a popular ballad proclaiming his gallantry and good looks. He is carrying on a clandestine love affair that has led him to promise to marry the sister of his friend and rival, Bannojo. In the absence of their lord, Ichinoshin, he finds himself receiving the attention of his master's wife, Osai, ostensibly as a potential bridegroom for her daughter but actually as the object of her own affections. In a sudden reversal, Gonza is caught by Bannojo in apparent adultery with Osai. The couple, though innocent, are ruined. Their only recourse is to flee, thereby enabling Ichinoshin to preserve his honor by tracking them down and killing them, exacting the socially prescribed vengeance.

In *Gonza* the story-telling and film-making is almost entirely straightforward, with a few notable exceptions: a brief flashback presents a moment of lost happiness when the family is together as the older daughter performs a dance at a festival; slow-motion is used to show the servants smashing the exquisite lacquer dowry furnishings of the now disgraced Osai, and later, the bloody vengeance of Ichinoshin. Yet the Shinoda who began *Double Suicide* with his little joke has a samurai in *Gonza* refer to double suicide as a "strange fashion," and cannot resist having the unhappy couple pass a barker on the street announcing a drama about a pair of adulterous lovers—Gonza and Osai. Their adventures are already notorious, and have been transformed into theater. "They elope but get killed," the barker tells the crowd, adding, "The best part's now starting." (The puppet drama *Gonza* was in fact based on an incident that occurred only weeks before Chikamatsu wrote his play, though the name of the title character was taken from a ballad a half-century old.)

In general, however, Shinoda leaves aside the kind of self-conscious devices that mark *Double Suicide,* preferring instead to observe each moment with a reflective, detached manner reminiscent of Ozu. Though stylistically different, the net result is the same as in *Double Suicide:* if anything, the tragedy seems more overpowering because the film-making is so measured and carefully paced, attaining the feverish pitch of *Double Suicide* only in the final deadly encounter between the fleeing couple and the pursuing husband.

The tragedy seems a conspiracy of the universe, of a fate that will let the unfortunate couple neither return nor escape. But it is also—and here Shinoda makes his most powerful point—a conspiracy of the times. In *Double Suicide* the samurai are told by a merchant that they are not so special, that swords are easy to buy. In *Gonza* the status of the samurai is given an even more disturbing reading, with the film showing that advancement comes not through martial prowess but is to be won instead through service as a courtier, specifically mastery of the tea ceremony. This frustrating situation is behind all the conflict, for Ichinoshin has been promoted because of his expertise as a tea master, and the tension between Gonza and Bannojo arises partly because of contention over who is to perform the tea ritual in Ichinoshin's absence. With the greatest, most bitter irony, the film ends with a tea ceremony: the court and its values have triumphed.

Aided by the expert cinematography of Kazuo Miyagawa, the foremost cameraman in Japan (*Ugetsu, Rashomon*), and a minimal but nonetheless totally effective score by Takemitsu (relying heavily on the jarring, dissonant sound of the biwa), Shinoda records the events with the patience and calm of a chess master. Yet the

situation is colored by absurdity, by an awareness of the grotesque as an essential part of the tragedy arising out of the conflict between social obligation and personal desire. Thus the eldest daughter begs Ichinoshin to kill her and spare her mother, his wife—only to have the grandmother interject "Well said." Similarly, the grandfather effusively thanks his son-in-law, Ichinoshin, after Ichinoshin proclaims he will not reject Osai's family. In each case, the response is appropriate, yet from a modern perspective the feudal social forms seem strangely out of joint with human feelings.

The most complex statement of all is reserved for the reunion of Ichinoshin with Osai, who says only, "I have missed you, my husband." The line is at once a statement of fact, an entreaty, a tactic. That it can bear all three meanings simultaneously is a testimony to the exceptional performance of Shima Iwashita as Osai, whose attitude toward Gonza is a volatile combination of love and jealousy.

Shinoda's style is so sharply honed that watching the film is like floating downstream propelled only by the current: since there are only a few "big" moments, the accomplishment may seem effortless. Yet all the while there is an undercurrent of tension, because the characters are not really in control. One particularly revealing moment occurs early on when, chatting idly as she arranges her daughter's hair, Osai gets carried away and remarks that Gonza is "the best of all samurai" and that if she were not married, she would marry him. She stops abruptly, aware—as the audience is aware—that she has gone too far, that she has been talking matter-of-factly, but all too honestly. In the puppet play, the narrator remarks at this point that Osai's statement is "the jest of the moment, uttered out of love for her child, but it has an unpleasant ring" (Donald Keene's translation in *Major Plays of Chikamatsu*). Thanks to Shinoda's direction and the playing of the actors—the casting throughout is remarkable—that "ring" is unmistakable, unsettling.

Osai is obsessed to the point of pathology, insisting immediately after they are trapped that Gonza call her his wife and that she will call him her husband. Gonza sees the delusions and distortions that are at work, and tries to resist. When Osai tells him she never wanted to marry Ichinoshin but always loved him, he tells her that isn't true, she only thinks that because of her husband's absence. But in the end he gives in when she asks whether he has any emotions, and begs him to surrender his samurai pride and make love to her. As Keene notes, Osai makes her request "ostensibly so that her husband . . . will have grounds for killing them" but, at bottom, because "she wants to sleep with Gonza before she dies."

GONZA THE SPEARMAN

Osai may be hysterical, driven as she is by a fatal infatuation. Gonza, for his part, errs by getting caught out in his lie when he tells Osai he isn't engaged to Bannojo's sister. Yet if the couple is flawed, they are not evil. Social circumstances in the form of Ichinoshin's absence and Gonza's need for advancement drive them to misjudgment and a lack of self-control. And when they slip, as in any great tragedy, they are driven relentlessly to their doom. All are lost: Osai, Ichinoshin and their children; Bannojo and his sister; and Gonza, who seems dazed to the end, confused by the fate that has befallen him.

Shinoda worked briefly as an assistant to Ozu, and made a detailed study of Ozu's editing style. Some of the transitions and cut-aways in *Gonza* recall the master's absolute control, as well as the sense Ozu established of ongoing, impassive life outside the immediate tragedy. Like Ozu, Shinoda beautifully exploits long takes with a static camera. But Shinoda studied Mizoguchi's style as well, so that he is also a master of fluid camera movements and a dynamic style of montage and framing that is less constricted than Ozu's.

In *Gonza,* the tragedy is intensified throughout by the contrast between the extraordinary beauty of the settings and costumes and the horror of the situation: what Audie Bock has called Shinoda's "icy aestheticism" is much in evidence, though suffused with deep feeling

despite all the apparent detachment. Thus Ichinoshin, as he pursues Osai and Gonza, pauses in a shop for a drink and notices a child crying who reminds him of his own children, back at home, whom he is about to make motherless. Shortly thereafter, Osai has a similar experience with children passing on a bridge. No sooner has she remarked upon how lovely they look, than a priest walks past with an image of Buddha associated with the apocalypse. As if on cue, Ichinoshin appears.

Double Suicide started at a high pitch and then kept going higher to its excruciating climax. *Gonza* includes a masterfully staged showdown between Ichinoshin and Gonza, but neatly circumvents another, when Osai's brother meets the betrayer, Bannojo: their meeting in the woods is brilliantly shot, but the actual fight is elided—a sign, I think, of Shinoda's maturity. He does however, pull the old head-in-the-basket shock tacic: that is getting a bit tired, as Kurosawa was perhaps suggesting in his play upon it in *Ran.* (There a general, after leading the couple who have usurped the kingdom into thinking that he has committed an assassination as desired and brought back the head as proof, opens the basket only to reveal a statue of a fox head. He then claims the "exchange" is the work of spirits.)

Essentially a psychological and social study, *Gonza* may lack the kind of extroverted character necessary to reach a mass audience today, at least in America. In Japan, it was a success, partly because Gonza is played by Hiromi Go, a leading heartthrob singing star. But in America Japanese films must employ subtitles, unlike the stuffy Masterpiece Theater school of costume drama with their oh-so-elegant British accents. Furthermore, *Gonza,* though its ending is extremely bloody (and in color, unlike *Double Suicide*), is not the kind of samurai film that leaves the screen awash in slice-and-dice heroics. The violence in *Gonza* is a horrible obligation, not an exuberant act of revenge, and it is deliberately presented as a gruesome business. Gonza stands no chance in the fight: he has sold his sword. But he must still demonstrate his samurai honor and does, in the end begging Ichinosin to finish him off with a spear, a request that is granted—and shown in a final, stomach-turning shot.

As Shinoda said during a recent visit to the United States, "This is a story about people who have not enjoyed a moment of freedom." He then added, "It is therefore strange to moderns." Yet as a choice for a literary adaptation, *Gonza* is not escapist historical drama but a devastating indictment of contemporary Japanese culture, including the corporate world. Thus Shinoda also remarked that for the samurai to learn the tea ceremony is like the modern-day Japanese learning to use computers: a new fad, a new form of regimentation. Gonza and his spear, perfect instruments of a heroic feudal code, are lost in a world where romantic entanglements and court politics are more deadly than opposing armies.

In dialogue added by Shinoda and his scenarist Taeko Tomioka, the samurai lament that "The world is too peaceful. Waiting for war slows a samurai's promotion." Throughout the film characters take part in a running debate over the relative importance of the tea ceremony and the martial arts. This does not necessarily mean that Shinoda is Mishima at one remove, mourning the old martial virtues. He does admire the uncompromising devotion to the martial arts displayed by Osai's brother. Yet he is nevertheless sympathetic to the relatively gentle Ichinoshin, as in a beautiful scene where the son is tactfully persuaded to stay at home rather than accompany his father on his deadly mission. Shinoda's strong identification with the samurai has less to do with macho fantasy than with an awareness of social change. He has said that, as a director working in film for mature audiences, he feels like a dinosaur, and is, like Gonza, a misfit in his age. Shinoda is acutely aware that he came in just as movies lost their dominance to television. Though he has made documentaries and dramatic reconstructions for television, and recently filmed an extended rock video with Hiromi Go, he has refused to work for TV on a regular basis. So far he has been successful at finding support for his feature films.

There's no sentimental elegy at work in *Gonza:* the samurai are not at all perfect figures. Though Bannojo may be speaking out of anger and jealousy, he is proven right when he tells his sister that Gonza will not marry her because "He understands nothing. Not women, not life itself." Gonza traps himself by denying his engagement. In turn, Bannojo brings on his own death by acting so quickly to ruin his rival. He had earlier made advances to Osai, and there is a suggestion of incestuous desires in a scene with his sister after she tells him the identity

of her beloved. (Like a scene showing Gonza practicing with his spear, the confrontation between Bannojo and his sister is bathed in an expressionistic red light that is, I assume, meant to indicate sunset but hints at an unwordly, threatening aspect surrounding the entire drama). At times Bannojo appears almost a comic foil for Gonza, a mere mouse; at other times he seems more like the arrogant villain of the play version, a despoiling Iago. Yet in the end, like the others, he seems a pawn caught up in a larger, tragic game. There is simply no satisfaction to be found, as is suggested by Ishinoshin's lament: "Success in killing the mother of three children? Success in killing my wife? And this is duty? What a world we live in."

For all its grimness, *Gonza* is not without its humor. Like Shakespeare, with whom he is often compared, Chikamatsu delights in low comic types. Shinoda exploits these characters, especially the servants, with great relish and skill, right down to the end, as when one commoner says to another as they observe the funeral procession, "No more adultery, I hope." But this wry remark is undercut by the surrounding views of the fallen world the charcters inhabit. It follows a shot of Bannojo's sister wandering disconsolate and disheveled on the beach, singing the Gonza song. And it leads to a sequence at the house, with the younger daughter running playfully through the rooms, only to come upon her grandmother quietly crying in the now empty room that belonged to Osai. As the grandfather leads the two other grandchildren through the deliberate movements of the tea ceremony, the final shot presents the elder daughter staring blankly out of the screen at the audience, an image of absolute desolation. —ROBERT SILBERMAN

Books

THE MOTION PICTURE GUIDE

Edited by Jay R. Nash, Stanley R. Ross, and Robert B. Connelly. New York: Cinebooks/Bowker, 1985 and 1986. 12 vols., $750, plus 1986 and 1987 annual vols., $100 each.

Among other self-bestowed superlatives, *The Motion Picture Guide* proclaims itself to be *"the only definitive and all-encompassing film encyclopedia in the world."* (Foreword—italics theirs) As I shall demonstrate at length below, it is far from definitive. Indeed it is almost laughably error-prone, slapdash, ill-edited, and unreliable, and even its comprehensiveness (at more than 9,000 pages) has limitations. Readers may well wonder, therefore, why it has been applauded by such apparently respectable publications as *Library Journal* ("The *Guide's* factual material and synopses are unequaled elsewhere"), *Wilson Library Bulletin* ("Destined to become a classic of film reference"), or *American Libraries* ("No library should be without it")—not to mention Roger Ebert ("a film lover's treasure . . . a definitive reference work"). The answer will be no surprise to those who remember my article "The Reference Shelf Shuffle" [*FQ,* 36:2, Winter, 82-83, pp. 5-16], which surveyed the general shoddiness of film reference literature. The applause here is the familiar result of uninformed and/or careless reviewers taking seriously a publisher's press releases and not bothering to scrutinize carefully the actual volumes in question.

While the *Guide's* scope is undeniably ambitious, its execution bears the fatal marks of amateur scholarship, and the fact that it is destined to repose on the shelves of many American libraries, misleading readers for decades, is in fact a major calamity of film thought.

Let us proceed to the details of the indictment. The first eight volumes of the set contain 35,000 entries on American and "selected" foreign sound films dating from 1927 through 1983 and running alphabetically from A to V. For reasons unknown, titles W through Z have been shunted off to Volume IX, which also includes A-Z for 1984 plus 59 pages of "Miscellaneous Talkies," evidently afterthoughts. Volume X, *Silent Film, 1910-1936* [sic], allegedly contains "every U.S. and British silent feature film ever made, as well as many important ones from other lands. Roughly 3,500 such films have been profiled and more than 10,000 are listed with credits" (Foreword, X, v). Volumes XI and XII are indices; XIII and XIV are the 1986 and 1987 *Annuals.*

In its Foreword and in its publicity campaign, the *Guide* has made many sweeping claims, attempting to portray itself as an absolutely

of her beloved. (Like a scene showing Gonza practicing with his spear, the confrontation between Bannojo and his sister is bathed in an expressionistic red light that is, I assume, meant to indicate sunset but hints at an unwordly, threatening aspect surrounding the entire drama). At times Bannojo appears almost a comic foil for Gonza, a mere mouse; at other times he seems more like the arrogant villain of the play version, a despoiling Iago. Yet in the end, like the others, he seems a pawn caught up in a larger, tragic game. There is simply no satisfaction to be found, as is suggested by Ishinoshin's lament: "Success in killing the mother of three children? Success in killing my wife? And this is duty? What a world we live in."

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In its Foreword and in its publicity campaign, the *Guide* has made many sweeping claims, attempting to portray itself as an absolutely

definitive collection of motion picture data—destined to later include 28 volumes on foreign films and film personnel plus uncounted volumes on documentaries, made-for-TV films, shorts, serials, and newsreels. It is true that the *Guide* is the largest film encyclopedia published to date in the United States. All its other claims are dubious.

The *Guide* claims, for instance, to offer "complete credits." To test this assertion, I selected four entries at random and compared them with the *American Film Institute* catalog listings: *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965), *Julius Caesar* (1970), *Robin Hood* (1922), and *State Street Sadie* (1928). In every case the *Guide* credits were less extensive than those in the *AFI* volumes. No doubt this will annoy the "truly interested reader" and "serious researcher" for whom the *Guide* claims to be written. Those same individuals probably will not tolerate "complete filmographies" (Index, I-1) which assert that Buñuel's first film was *Los Olvidados* in 1950 (I-832), that *L'Age d'Or* (1930) is a 1979 film (I-382), and that that film was Salvador Dali's only film credit (I-667). Nor is it acceptable to imply Fellini was absent from films circa 1950-56 (I-926) and that Geraldine Chaplin did not appear in *Cria Cuervos* (I-492). Certainly omitting *Ecstasy* from Hedy Lamarr's filmography belies any claim to completeness.

Even in the prosaic area of film dates, the *Guide* is problematic. Its practice of dating films by year of US release may be an acceptable criterion in general—but only if its obvious problems are taken into account. For instance, *M* was produced in 1930 and released in 1931, the date most widely found in the literature. However, it did not premiere in New York until 1933, the date the *Guide* gives (p. 1,781). This historical dislocation is arguably minor, but a responsible editor would have noted it. Take the 1933 *Ecstasy* (the Hedy Lamarr film): it is listed as 1940 when it was "released generally in the U.S." (717). True, but substantially misleading to the "dedicated scholars" the *Guide* supposedly wants to serve. In fact, *Ecstasy* had a considerable 1930s history. While it may not rank with the *Miracle* case, it was litigated extensively because of New York State censorship and there are thirteen citations in *The New York Times Index* for 1935-1939. To list it as a 1940 film, of course, eliminates the possibility in many minds that research prior to 1940 may prove fruitful.

Specifying film lengths, or running times, has always been a hazardous business given the variant prints in circulation and the contradictory citations in the literature. The *Guide* has compounded the confusion by adopting "reels" as its measure of length. Particularly as defined by the *Guide,* the non-specific term "reels" is an unacceptable, contradictory, and confusing measure of film length. The following passage is quoted verbatim, to demonstrate the sloppiness of the *Guide's* writing as well as the problems with using reels to indicate film length.

> The following A-Z miscellaneous compilation of silent films include [sic] *all* feature-length films not covered in the preceding major entires. Approximately 10,000 films are herein listed, and, coupled to the major entries in this volume, 3500 in number [the Foreword to Volume I also gives "3,000" and "35,000" as the number of major silent feature entries], make up the world's most complete and comprehensive single-volume encyclopedia of silent film. Feature length, theatrically released films have been determined as any film exceeding a 50-minute running time, translated from approximately four reels or the equivalent footage. Those titles where (?r) appears signifies [sic] that feature length is assumed but exact footage is undetermined. Throughout this volume running time has been given in reels as the best approximation of length. Number of reels listed are those of the original release. Minimum length is 3,000 feet which is 50 minutes at 16fps, 16 frames per foot (35mm film); 16 frames per second (standard silent projection speed). Assuming approximately 870 feet per reel, 3,000 feet = 3-1/2 reels, which we round off to 4 reels. Entries are listed thusly: Title (Year, Country), (Reels), Director or Producer (if possible), lead players (4 names if possible). NOTE: Some foreign silents are dated as late as 1936. (X, 317)

That passage contains a number of unwarranted assumptions, notably that it is acceptable to "round off" 3-1/2 reels to four, that silent-era projection speed was standardized at 16fps, and that all silent film reels contained "approximately" 870 feet. This last, unsupported contention is particularly troublesome. The "dedicated scholars" for whom the *Guide* is "invaluable" will most likely inquire as to a source for that statement. Other than baldfaced assertion, the *Guide* provides no answer.

Other problems also arise. For example, the *Guide* earlier stated that Adolph Zukor's famous import, *Queen Elizabeth,* was "only a three-reeler and the mogul falsely advertised it as being four reels in length." (X, 223) Sadoul lists *Queen Elizabeth* at 3,093 feet, which would not readily fit on three 1,000-foot reels. But

taking the *Guide's* criterion and dividing 3,093 by 870, *QE* was 3.55 reels—which the *Guide* should have rounded off to four reels. In this instance, they stuck by their guns, and listed *Queen Elizabeth* at three reels. While such inconsistencies are not earthshaking, they cause justifiable suspicions about 13,500 entries whose length is described by such "reels."

While no one would deny that the *Guide's* compilers have been assiduous in collecting their information, their statement that Volume X contains "every U.S. and British silent feature" is the kind of statement that cautious scholars do not venture to assert—knowing that film history, with its battalions of researchers, keeps turning up new material constantly.

Assessing the *Guide's* accuracy in recounting what happens in films is an even more important arena. "Your authors have seen the films," they proudly declare. Why then so many errors, of both commission and omission, in plot summaries? A random search uncovered mistakes in plot synopses in such diverse entries as *M* (1,781-2), *Judith* (1965, 1,488), *Nosferatu* (1922, X, 189), *Closely Watched Trains* (1967, 455), *Queen Christina* (1933, 2,504-5) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939, 3,891-2). They range from minor and obscure to significant and obvious: you will not have an accurate understanding of *Oz* unless you know that when Dorothy landed in Munchkinland her house crushed the Wicked Witch of the East—a fact the *Guide* fails to recount. Not all of the other story-line errors are that outrageous. A couple of further samples: In *Queen Christina* Gilbert was invited to share Garbo's room, rather than the reverse (2,504) nor does she take his body aboard ship at film's end: rather, she discovers him dying aboard ship when she arrives. In *M,* Else's mother is preparing her lunch, not her supper, and it would seem that an entry of this length (1-1/4 pages) could afford space to describe Schraenker, the underworld chieftain who is a very obvious comment on the Nazis, and to note what portion of the "Peer Gynt" suite Lorre whistles—it is significant that Lang chose the "Hall of the Mountain King" with its suggestion of abusing young girls.

There are many other examples, but these, and the extended analysis of *The Blue Angel* which follows, should clearly demonstrate the *Guide's* unacceptable distortions of film texts. I am hard pressed to understand how anyone who had screened *The Blue Angel* could make fifteen errors in recounting the story. True, some are minor, but errors at any level ultimately affect readers' conclusions. In this case it certainly does make a significant difference in assessing Professor Rath's character if one learns that it was not until his *second* visit to the Café Blue Angel that Lola-Lola "conquered" him. The *Guide* describes the entire "vamping process" as taking place upon his first visit, which does not allow for the interplay of his archaic sense of proper conduct and narrow comprehension of the world with her attraction to the unusual. Later, Rath's students draw cartoons on the chalkboard and, in the ensuing hubbub, the school's principal discharges Rath not, as the *Guide* states, for his indiscretion with Lola-Lola but because Rath intends to marry her and, presumably, bring her into the school's "polite" setting. Then, the *Guide* reports: "Dumfounded [sic], Jannings goes back to the club to see Dietrich, seeking sympathy. His savings and his courtly, ancient manners intrigue her. She comforts him and then quickly convinces him to marry her." (246)

In fact, Professor Rath proposes to Lola-Lola because his sense of duty requires he make her an honest woman. She laughs uproariously at this but ultimately accepts his proposal because of its novelty. Pursuing the *Guide's* story line leads to the conclusion that *The Blue Angel* is about the "decline and fall of a respectable man at the hands of a scheming vamp" (246).

> He is made up in a grotesque clown outfit and indignities are heaped upon him by other players, a raw egg is cracked upon his skull cap and the audience howls with laughter as the egg runs over his face. He then crows like a rooster, something Jannings [Professor Rath] had done earlier at his wedding. Now he is mortified and disgraced. Jannings is half mad with humiliation and runs offstage only to see his wife making love to another actor, Albers [Mazeppa]. He grabs the golddigger who has ruined his life and begins to strangle her, but stagehands pull him away and toss him into the alley.

Well, first of all, there were no "other players" on stage, only Kiepert, the magician-impresario. Professor Rath was not wearing a skull cap but a clown's hairpiece and when he runs offstage his wife is not "making love" to Mazeppa, she is rather disdainfully tolerating him. Such behavior reinforces her character as a bored, indifferent prostitute whose credo, and the film's theme, is encapsulated in her song, "Falling in Love Again." Lola-Lola is not a gold-

digger who has ruined a respectable man, she merely exists, wallowing in pre-Hitlerian *Weltschmerz.* When Professor Rath grabs her, he is pulled away by a crowd, not just "stagehands," and Mazeppa brings a straitjacket-like garment to restrain Rath, who is put in some sort of storage room, not thrown in the alley. Later, Kiepert releases him and they have an important conversation which emphasizes Rath's petty, autocratic character.

Because of the haphazardness of much of the *Guide's* writing, it is impossible to determine if such errors stem from tendentious interpretations of films or mere unchecked lapses of memory. In any case, such plot distortions occur in so many entries that they fatally undermine confidence in the *Guide's* synopses.

What are we to make of the critical judgments expressed in the *Guide*? We cannot ask for accuracy in critical judgments in the same way we should insist upon it in factual accounts of a film's length, credits, or plot. While it is arguable that critical judgments are implicit in any account of a film and therefore we might as well have them openly expressed, my own view is that evaluatory, judgmental statements are out of place in standard reference works. In any case, I do recognize their prevalence, and if we cannot eliminate them, we should at least require that they exhibit rationality and consistency.

The *Guide* adopts the popular system of rating films with asterisks to render summary judgment. Such systems are merely facile representations of someone's preference. The *Guide* uses a ten-point system—zero to five asterisks plus the use of "half-marks" which mean "almost there but not quite." It is unclear if it is possible to garner a "zero-and-a-half" [almost poor?]. Besides the inherent problems with such shorthand systems, the *Guide* ratings make no effort at consistency or even at correlation between ratings, length of entries (*Guide* entries range from a few lines to over three pages), and evaluative words.

A typical comparison: *Destry Rides Again, The Detective,* and *Dr. Strangelove* are all awarded 3-1/2 asterisks but their evaluations and column lengths are quite disparate. *Destry* (given 10-1/4") is a "classic" with Dietrich and Stewart working "splendidly together"; "Never before had Dietrich been so wonderful in a film" (634). *The Detective* entry (6-3/8") avoids commendatory phrases but concludes that the film "was generally very satisfying." (635) *Dr. Strangelove* (6") is "so bold and wild that it became the first significant film of the absurd" (680). As against these entries, *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (4-1/4") collected four asterisks. I do not detect the workings of high critical intelligence here. Indeed, it would not be exaggerating to say that the critical commentary in the *Guide* volumes is almost entirely gushy and worthless fan material.

When it does display consistency, the *Guide* sometimes does so in unsavory ways. Take its treatment of Sophia Loren, who is mentioned in 55 entries. I do not propose to argue here the question of Loren's talent—she has appeared in some real potboilers—but the *Guide* displays a curiously venomous attitude toward her performances, her figure, and her accented pronunciation of English. The *Guide* admits (3,603) that *Two Women* proved "that she was a mature actress who could hold an audience with her talent"; about *Woman of the River* (3,906) "Loren looks her best in the short shorts and hip boots she gets to wear, and she does display some talent here . . ."—two comments that hardly balance the *Guide's* obvious bias in its other Loren entries. The majority of the *Guide's* "insightful commentary" on Loren films constitutes an unrelenting barrage of demeaning remarks about her physical attributes, betraying a truly perverse fascination: "her voluptuous heavy-breasted body" (278), "her fleshy embrace" (864), "her magic mammaries" (1,488), etc., etc. Finally, textual incoherence prevails: "practicallybare [sic] breasts" (3,953) and "she practically bears [sic] her breasts" (3,596).

This is a pathetic alternative for reasoned historical information. And its casting of sexuality in a derogatory and unsavory light is by no means unique to the *Guide's* treatment of Loren. It is notable that the *Guide* excludes "all X-rated or unrated films of a similar nature . . . [which are] productions of [no] filmic interest to the general reader or the serious researcher." It is unclear whether foreign films which went unrated for nonsexual reasons also were proscribed. The criteria for selecting "notable" foreign films are unclear. Moreover, in view of the *Guide's* advertised scope and editorial attitude toward sexuality, "Parental Recommendations" also demand explanation. Even in this area, inconsistency prevails; *Working Girls* appears in the 1987 annual volume with rather

positive commentary and three asterisks ("good") even though it went unrated. As society changes, today's "X" is tomorrow's PG-13 and blanket restrictive attitudes undercut claims of comprehensiveness.

Another dubious practice, more appropriate to fan publications than to an encyclopedic work, is the use of performer names instead of character names in describing plots. The rule is fairly consistently applied (*Citizen Kane* and *Man of La Mancha* are exceptions) but it is distracting, sometimes confusing, and tends to subordinate films to their stars. I, for one, prefer to read the story of Dorothy on the Yellow Brick Road.

The most damning feature of the *Guide,* however, is the level of its thought and language. Although the 1987 *Annual* is a cut above the other 13 volumes, the improvement is not sufficiently redeeming to save the work. Punctuation and grammar are marginally adequate although the tendency to splice clauses together interminably is maddening. Spelling errors and inconsistencies abound to a degree unknown in other film reference works. But it is the prose itself that we should focus on, and it is incessantly second-rate. Its rambling entries are characterized by slang, weak diction, and banal phrasing plus an extraordinary fascination with trivia. Thus: "Gardenia out-acts [Bronson] in every scene (which is about as difficult as out-acting a fireplug)." (*Death Wish*) ". . . the whole mess should never have been released." (*Death Wish II*—both 607) "With that he coldcocks the Nazi." (*The Invaders,* 1,399). "Dietrich also sang some memorable tunes by Hollander and Loesser: 'Little Joe the Wrangler,' 'You've Got That Look (That Leaves Me Weak),' and 'See What The [sic] Boys in the Back Room Will Have,' the last song becoming umbilical to Dietrich." (*Destry Rides Again,* 634)

This gossipy, journalistic style lacks critical acuity, depth, and seriousness, not to mention the urbanity and polish one expects in major reference works; it would be more appropriate, perhaps, in a direct-mail merchandise catalog. It is even more embarrassing when the *Guide* occasionally attempts sophisticated remarks, as in this incoherent assessment of *Cat People* (1982): "Director Schrader's Ozu-Bressonian transcendentalism is tossed under chic-bloodiness [sic] in his debut [sic] at the helm." (379–80) Luckily, if too late, someone on the *Guide* remembered Schrader's *Blue Collar* (1978) and other earlier directorial credits when it came to page 2,570 of the Index volumes.

Hyperbole is another tiresome stylistic trait in the *Guide.* "*Birth of a Nation* is, in fact, the most important motion picture ever made!" (X, 31). "America's most popular and beloved movie . . ." (*Casablanca,* 368). "Certainly one of the ten best films of all time, *Citizen Kane* . . ." (431). "Simply one of the best movies ever made, *The* [*sic*] *Seven Samurai* . . ." (2,839). "Beyond question and doubt, this film is the greatest musical MGM or any one else ever produced . . ." (*Singin' in the Rain,* 2,938). "One of the world's most beloved films, *The Wizard of Oz* . . ." (3,891). Such vapid superlatives tend to render critical judgments in other entries even more meaningless.

Where sensible commentary is absent, irrelevant trivia predominate. What value to learn, in an article about *Death Takes a Holiday* (606), that Fredric March would win his second Oscar 12 years later? Brief irrelevancies of that sort are outdone by sizeable passages devoted to extraneous information. The entry for *Ten Days That Shook the World* [not cross-referenced to its original title, X, 279], allocates half its space to Frank Capra's description of his meeting with Eisenstein. No editorial hand has restrained this tendency to ramble on with whatever trivia are available, however loosely connected to the film under consideration—a hallmark of virtually every entry over three inches in length. References for such trivia are seldom provided and a good deal of this uncited material has the ring of press-release hyperbole which adds nothing to the *Guide's* appeal to "dedicated scholars."

Despite the manifest flaws of the *Guide,* many of which should have been obvious even to reviewers whose pronouncements were based upon Volume I alone, many college, university, and public libraries have purchased the *Guide* since it was so well reviewed in the "professional" library press. Reference librarians generally become committed to such major acquisitions; hence, with the successive volumes planned in the series, countless further inaccuracies and misconceptions about motion pictures will become entrenched in the public mind. Thus *The Motion Picture Guide* represents not only a failure of research achievement, but an equal failure of the evaluative machinery by which our society supposedly judges major publication projects. —DAN GREENBERG

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